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FOOD

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Life on the Tradewater

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

My mother's earliest Hopkins County ancestor arrived on the eastern shore of the Tradewater River in 1801. In the years following, he and his family would see the area transform from a bustling Native American trade post into a railroad town, and then into a nationally recognized health resort. They would personally witness the affects of the New Madrid earthquakes on western Kentucky: waking, terrified, in their shifting cabins, plowing uncertainly across newly created sand blows and — in one instance — giving birth amid the series of earth shattering, river reversing temblors.

What follows is a brief account of the little settlement on the edge of Hopkins County that would eventually become known as Dawson Springs.

From Big Bend To Chalklevel

In the year 1800, the Tradewater River — which now forms the boundary between Hopkins and Caldwell Counties — was about as far west as settlers could go in this part of Kentucky. Across the river was still Indian territory, and although the 1786 (second) Treaty of Hopewell stated in part that, “the hatchet shall be forever buried,” it also declared that no settler shall attempt a permanent residence in Indian territory. West of the Tradewater River was primarily old Chickasaw country, and it would have been foolhardy to test the articles of the treaty.

There were a few indigenous settlements remaining on this side of the river, too; the largest in the area was the Big Bend village located at present day Dawson Springs. The village was considered neutral ground, a trading post where Native Americans of various tribes could trade goods with white American settlers and European tradesmen. Here, one could buy, sell or trade anything from foodstuffs and furs to horses, medicine and ornamental items. Of equal importance, it was also a place to socialize and exchange news.

However, the burgeoning population of former colonists was gradually forcing the Indians further and further west. In 1807, part of Henderson County including the Big Bend area became the newly formed Hopkins County, which numbered just over 350 landowners. Within a year's time, the long time Indian village on the Tradewater succumbed to a new, white settlement called Chalklevel.

The Chalybeate Well

In 1872, the Elizabethtown and Paducah Railroad came through and Chalklevel became Tradewater Station. Shortly thereafter the name changed yet again, to Dawson, in honor of Bryant Dawson, one of the wealthy landowners who facilitated the railroad's expansion.

When Washington I. Hamby discovered iron water (chalybeate) on his property in 1881, which was believed to have medicinal properties. Later, in 1893, a cistern was dug at the site and given the name, Chalybeate Well No. 1. After the discovery of a second well, the company of Hamby's Salts, Iron and Lithia Well was born, putting the little town of Dawson on the map as a health spa and resort. In 1898 the town added the title “Springs” to its name, finally becoming Dawson Springs.

By then, most of the Chickasaw, Shawnee, Cherokee and others who had lived there for centuries were long gone, having ceded their western Kentucky and Tennessee lands to the U.S. government some 80 years earlier in 1818. Eventually they and many other tribes



All photos by Laura Hunt Angel

In addition to items like these, above, traders at the Big Bend could obtain everything that like on the frontier required.



The Three Sisters of squash, corn and beans are sacred to Native Americans.

received designated territories primarily west of the Mississippi.

At present there are no federally recognized tribes within the state of Kentucky, but this does not mean that there are no Indians. This only means that they are not recognized by the government and therefore, do not qualify for any of the government benefits allotted to tribe members whose families did comply with the removal acts. As proof of their existence, remnants of the rich Native American culture that once thrived in and around Dawson Springs persists to this day in the form of mounds, artifacts and even remains of a Native American rock fort.

The Recipes

With each iteration, the dinner tables of Big Bend/Chalklevel/Dawson Springs expanded to include the traditions and preferences of the melting pot of cultures drawn to the area.

Meals would have regularly included meat dishes such as venison, turkey, fish, raccoon and other small game, as well as wild and cultivated fruits and vegetables.

I chose some of the recipes that would have been common in Native American households in the early days of the settlement. Not surprisingly, many of the old (pre-government commodity) methods of Native American cooking utilize natural, low

processed ingredients. Many, such as the sunflower cakes and squash bread, are also gluten free.

Three Sisters Stew

As most everyone knows, the Three Sisters are squash, beans and corn (corn: Chickasaw, tanchi; Cherokee, tsalu); these three crops were the mainstays of the Native American diet and were considered sacred. Some form of this dish was prepared widely throughout Native American culture, and the Indians of Hopkins County were no exception. This would be a perfect accompaniment to any fall supper, including your Thanksgiving meal. After Thanksgiving, some leftover turkey added in would make a wonderful turkey stew.

Since the Indians varied their stew according to what was available to them, you can use any variety of the Three Sisters that you have your own kitchen and still remain true to the recipe. This modernized version contains chicken stock and corn starch. While some form of chicken broth may have been used when available, and when thickened, it was no doubt with corn meal or a couple of boiled and mashed potatoes. If you like, use frozen vegetables in place of the fresh.

2 cups canned hominy or fresh/frozen corn
2 cups fresh green beans, trimmed and snapped
2 cups cubed squash (winter or summer, your choice)
4-5 cups water or stock



Warm and golden fried squash bread is irresistible on a cool autumn evening.

Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons cornstarch
2 tablespoons meat grease or butter

Place vegetables in a large pot; add 4 cups of water or stock, reserving remaining cup liquid. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil then reduce heat to low and continue to cook, uncovered until vegetables are tender, 15 - 20 minutes. Combine cornstarch with 1/4 cup of the reserved liquid and pour into the stew, stirring gently until smooth and slightly thickened. Add more of the remaining liquid if too thick for your liking. Reduce heat; add meat grease or butter and stir gently until heated through. Serve hot. 4-6 servings.

Sunflower Seed Cakes

I received this recipe from a Native American friend, who advises that if you place the sunflower seeds in a cloth bag and rub the bag briskly, the husks will come off of the seeds “like a charm”. The Chickasaw and Choctaw, in particular, cultivated sunflowers and used the seeds to make both flour and oil. I used the advantage of a modern food processor rather than a mortar and pestle to grind the seeds.

1 1/2 cups hulled sunflower seeds
2 cups water
4 tablespoons cornflour
2 tablespoons honey
1/3 cup sunflower oil

Place the seeds and water in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, covered, for an hour. Drain the water from the seeds and process in a food processor until fine. Place the sunflower meal into a bowl and add the cornflour and honey, mixing with hands until it forms a stiff dough. Divide the dough into 15 balls and

press each into a cake, roughly the size of a salmon patty.

Heat the oil and fry the cakes on both sides until golden; serve warm. 15 cakes.

Fried Squash Bread

I learned shortly after moving to Hopkins County that although my mother was born here, no one in our area other than myself made fried corn bread like hers. Around these parts, most folks prefer Virginia Johnnycakes, or cornmeal griddle cakes. My mother, on the other hand, made Cherokee style fried corn pones, crispy on the outside and moist inside. This recipe is similar to hers but with the addition of crookneck squash and a bit of onion, and is a great way to use leftover cooked squash. Serve up a batch of these with your three sisters stew or a bowl of pinto beans and you've got it made.

2 yellow (crookneck) squash, coarsely chopped
1 small onion, diced fine
1 1/2 cups water
1 teaspoon salt
Black pepper, to taste
1 cup cornmeal
2 eggs, well beaten
1/3 cup buttermilk
Oil for frying

Place squash and onion in a saucepan with the water, add salt and pepper. Boil until tender, about 15 minutes; remove from heat. Mash undrained squash lightly with a fork, then combine, liquid and all, with the cornmeal, beaten eggs and buttermilk to make a moderately thick batter. Heat 1/2" oil in a skillet. Drop roughly 1/4 cupfuls of batter into hot oil, flatten slightly and fry on each side until golden. Makes 6-8 pones. NOTE: This recipe does not call for any leavening other than the eggs.