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Prairie trails journal

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MESSENGER FOOD COLUMNIST

Though most would consider St. Louis, Missouri, as the jumping off point for westward expansion, Kentucky played a major role in the movement as well. After the Civil War, vast numbers of Kentucky-born settlers headed out from their Kentucky homes in search of fresh land, business opportunities and — as in the case of many Mormons — freedom from religious persecution.

Though the Thanksgiving holiday as such had been officially instituted by Abraham Lincoln, it was not celebrated among the general public as extensively as today. Still, pioneers and settlers who survived the journey had much to be thankful for. In turn, a debt of gratitude is owed them, for their trials and hardships helped form much of the American west.

Heading Out

Among the Mormon families heading west was the family of one Jonathan Hunt of Muhlenberg Co., Ky. His daughter, Udora, recorded the family's travels in a series of prairie journals. Udora's journals, along with many other accounts of the trip, were compiled by descendant Norman E. Waite, in a collection entitled, "The Hunts of Bunkerville, Nevada." Here is a synopsis of the journey:

•••

Father converted Mother to the Gospel after they were married but she wasn't baptized at that time.

Before I [Udora] was born, father became awfully sick and mother was afraid he was dying many times. He had a lung disease something like TB. From that time on father was a sick man never knowing a day that he felt well, but working every hour that he could get around. He [Jonathan's eldest brother, Wilson] encouraging him to come but it was a long hard journey. He feared to go on account of mother and the children. He was afraid something might happen to prevent him from reaching Utah, then mother and the children would be left alone.

There were three children, Idella, Parley and me [Udora]. His folks in Zion begged him to sell his belongings if it only brought him enough to come with and they would help him all they could when he arrived. At last father and mother decided to try the trip as father's health seemed to be getting no better. They sold all their belongings and started west. Mother did save out of her belongings two feather beds and six feather pillows. These she made before she was married. We stopped and visited Uncle Jefferson and Aunt Sena Hunt the first night. Aunt Sena had married her cousin Jefferson Hunt. I well remember that we children were playing under a large tree, swinging each other in a swing. Uncle Jeff came out where we were and gave Idella and Parley each fifty cents and then handed me a dollar saying, "When you get to Utah buy you first, little girl, a new dress."

We stopped at Council Bluff[s], Iowa to visit Aunt Betsy, father's sister and Enoch Hunt, father's brother. We visited with them two weeks. We then took the train for Ogden [sic], Utah. Father's oldest brother, Wilson Hunt lived in Ogden.

We stayed in Ogden that year and Linda was born there.

•••

Due to Jonathan's poor health, the journey took well over a year. At one point, the family ran out of funds. Eldest daughter, Idella, aged fourteen, married as much out of necessity as romantic affection, and the mother, Susan Nanney Hunt, went to work until she had raised enough money for the family to finish the trip.

Jonathan died fairly young and this widow, Susan, along with only son, Parley, tried their hands at growing cotton but had numerous difficulties due to neighboring cattle eating their crops. The houses of both Susan and Parley still stand in Bunkerville and are on the National Register of Historic Places.

Waite's compilation, "The Hunts of Bunkerville, Nevada," makes an interesting afternoon read and is available in its entirety for free via



wikipedia photo

A lazy looking prairie dog enjoys a peanut.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Above and right: Fresh quince are a sunny shade of yellow and must be cooked before eaten to remove their sour, astringent qualities.

several websites including Fold3.

Oh, Build Me A Home

Though small, the houses of Susan and Parley were well built and sturdy, a step above the many sod dwellings that dotted the prairie. Called a "soddy," some sod houses were squared off and similar in appearance to a stick built home, but others were not much more than piles of cut sod with an opening left as the doorway.

Soddies were born out of necessity. When the government opened up the west through the 1862 Homestead Act, it required that all settlers wishing to claim land had to have built a permanent structure within six months and then live there for five years.

There was only one problem. The vast open plains were mostly treeless, with mile upon mile of grass and scrub. With no other resource at hand, settlers made good use of sod, cut and packed tightly to build homes that could withstand the near constant wind and shelter them from the extreme heat and cold. Often a section of the house was a "dug out," or a half buried shelter that could offer protection from storms and tornadoes. This manner of building houses earned prairie settlers the nickname "sod busters."

Hard To Come By

Meals along the prairie trails were largely prepared out of staples purchased prior to the journey or at trading posts stationed along the way. This included some meat in dried or salted form, but when possible hunters accompanying the group provided fresh game.

Born in Woodford, Kentucky, John C. Anderson married Nancy Wetherford, the daughter of a wealthy farmer from Casey, KY. During the Civil War Anderson joined up on the Confederate side where he attained the rank of major. After the war, Anderson was eager to enter the world of business and finance and headed to St. Louis in early 1866. There, he gathered supplies to embark on his first journey to Eagle Rock, (present day Idaho Falls, Idaho) where

his brother was a ferry operator on the Snake River. This was to be the first of many travels across the country for Anderson. By the end of his life, he would have crossed large swaths of the country some half dozen times.

The following account, taken from the journal of John C. Anderson, is his record of a missed opportunity for supper that turned into an afternoon of prairie-style entertainment.

•••

May 29, 1866, Camp No. 11

Traveled 29 mile today. The weather is beautiful. Camped again on Little Blue — and the gnats and mosquitoes [sic] tormented us so that just before sundown we hitched up and filled our Keg with water and loaded our ambulance with wood and started to the hills and again camped. [T]he gnats are gone — some mosquitoes [sic] still torment us[.] The grass where we are now is not good — being thin grass and growing in bunches. As we passed a mail station about 1½ miles from here two men came in who had been out after an antelope. [T]hey had two shots at him about 150 yards but did not kill him. We saw today a dead white wolf laying very near the road. We also saw a prairie dog that had wandered from his town. [H]e sat up on his hind legs and looked around in a very knowing way. I got my rifle to shoot him and had a sight on him when very suddenly he started and ran towards me showing no fear whatever he passed within a few feet of me and stopped again. [T]hus placing himself so completely in my power that I had not the heart to kill him and did not shoot. Our Cook undertook to catch him on foot and started at a brisk trot after him and ran up close to him. When he took a fresh start and distanced Cook in the first heat.

•••

Having made his fortune from various business pursuits in Eagle Rock, New York City and St. Louis, Anderson eventually came home to Kentucky, where he died in 1913.



The Recipes

On Thanksgiving, a light breakfast is all that is required to take the edge off while waiting for the big feast. These two antique recipes served our pioneering ancestors well, and would make a simple but festive holiday breakfast today.

Quince Preserves

When cooked with their peels, the bright yellow quince turns red. Here is a Victorian method for preserving quinces, printed as written in the Farmer's Home Almanac 1976 edition cookbook. (Pronounce the odd "f" as an "s" and the sentence will make sense.) The resulting product is not a true red but more of a rust/rose color. Another version, for quinces is white requires the addition of lemon juice, something most likely not available for most early settlers. Though not complicated, this is a time consuming recipe, so make your quince preserves in advance of the big day and keep it in the fridge until ready to serve.

To Preserve Quinces In Red

(from the Farmer's Home Almanac)

1. Chufe the most even quinces no ftony, and vulgarly called female quinces. Cut them into four, or eight quarters as you like beft, then pare and core them. If you meet any ftones in the quarters cut them off, too. In proportion as you prepare them thus, throw them into cold water. Save the peels and cores; and, mixing among them, when all your fruits are prepared, fuch them as are fmall, crooked, and otherwise illformed, an unfit to go along with the others, boil fufficient quantity of water to make a ftrong decoction, which pafs when done, and ftrain through a ftrong cloth into a pan.

2. In this decoction, put your quarters, and boil them in the preferring pan. When fufficiently done, put as many pounds of fugar as you had fruit, or three quarters of a pound at leaf. Boil this gently, and in a fhort time the quinces will become moft beautifully red. When you fee they have come to perfection, take them off the fire, and put

them; but do not cover them for a day, or two, after.

Modernized recipe: Quince are still prepared much the same today as hundreds of years ago and must be cooked before eating. A ratio of 2 lbs quince, 4 cups water and 4 cups sugar will work out nicely. Peel and core the quinces. Cover the peels and cores with the water and simmer for 30 minutes or so, until the peels are tender. Meantime, quarter the quinces and set them aside. (It's all right if they brown a bit.) Drain the cooked peels, reserving the liquid and discarding the peels and cores. Add the quartered quince to the liquid and cook on low until very tender, about 45 minutes. Add the sugar, stirring until it is dissolved. Continue cooking until the mixture is thickened and turns reddish, an hour or more. Cool, cover tightly and store in the fridge.

Udora's Sweet Milk Cakes

Serve these scratch made hotcakes with butter and traditional maple syrup or with molasses as Udora's family did. You can add an unusual and authentic touch to your holiday breakfast by topping them with quince preserves. Make these into traditional buttermilk pancakes by using about 4 cups buttermilk in place of the regular milk.

4 cups all purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 ½ teaspoons salt
3 ½ cups whole milk
2 large eggs
2 tablespoons melted lard or cooking oil

In a large bowl, sift together the flour, baking soda, baking powder and salt. Beat together the eggs, milk and melted lard. Blend the wet ingredients into the flour only until the flour is moistened. Drop by ¼ cupfuls onto a hot, greased griddle or skillet. When the surface of the hotcakes turn shiny and begin to bubble, 2-3 minutes. Turn them and continue cooking until nicely browned, 1-2 minutes more. Makes about 2 dozen hot cakes. Variations: Make your hotcakes special by adding, chocolate chips, dried fruit or cooked, crumbled sausage or bacon to the batter.