

HOW I LEARNED TO COOK

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The stove loomed aloof and intimidating on that warm August afternoon. Armor plated in cast iron, it exuded an air not of warmth and welcome, but of confrontation and challenge. Cold, but ready to cook. The only problem was that I couldn't cook. Recently married, I had somehow fallen into the job of cooking for my new family of five. Now here I was in our cabin on the mining claim, facing for the first time the realities of my calling. Where would I start?

Until a year ago my life had been spent almost entirely in school, involving eating rather than cooking. Even the few scattered weeks in children's camps, peeling potatoes for 100 kids, hardly translated into feeding four hungry men. I looked again at the stove. A fire—I needed a fire. Wood—I needed wood. Wood was in the backyard. How much wood? How big to split it? I picked up the axe and snickered at the thought—I have this great Victorian upbringing, and I'm learning to cook with an axe. Eventually I worried enough pieces apart to make a fire.

Relying heavily on my potato peeling skills, I got that first meal on the table. But the men, it turned out, were not so much interested in vegetables as in desserts. Their collective opinion of vegetables came later, when someone innocently said, "You know, I wonder if any one eats beets on purpose." They longed for baked goods—bread, pie, cookies, but especially pie. Someone found the cookbook my husband's mother had used. "Here is her pie crust recipe" they said.

Now I must digress. My own mother was a very good woman and had kept our fairly large family fed during the depression. But with all the good will in the world her pies were sheathed in cardboard. Plagued by memories of Frisbee-like orbs, I was simply afraid to start. However, one thing I had learned in those early years was to read and follow directions. So under the longing eye of my husband and the ravenous eyes of everyone else, I read the directions, made the pies, and was rewarded with cries of ecstasy. It was GOOD. I was surprised, hoped it wasn't just an accident, and kept my mouth shut. I had accidentally discovered the first rule of cooking: If you can read, you can cook.

My next big project was bread. Searching through a recipe box an ex-room mate had sent, I came across a yeast bread recipe that looked simple enough even for me. I started early—I wanted no distractions—and presently pulled from the oven four pie tins of yeast rolls. Brown, crusty, tantalizing. Not bad. I put them lovingly on top of the warming oven while I made the rest of the meal. It seemed there was a lot of traffic in the kitchen that evening, but my preparations proceeded and in due time everything was ready for the table. I reached for the pans of rolls. The pans were empty. Unbelieving, I looked again. While I was busy, those men had slipped in and out and had eaten EVERY LAST ROLL. That bread recipe has lasted from then on, and has finally become known as "granny's buns". So I had the second rule of cooking. If you are on shaky ground, get a recipe.

A family favorite was brown bean soup. I carefully followed directions—wash well, soak overnight, cook slowly all day, serve with hot rolls and onions, follow up with chocolate cake. The cake was no problem—this was before cake mixes, but room mate's recipe box had lots of cake recipes. That evening I tentatively served the soup. The men ate it with relish, but my husband seemed embarrassed. The next soup day I asked him about it. "Well," he said, "you noticed beans produce a lot of gas." I had, indeed. "You need to take the snappers out." So there I was, carefully cutting the little spots out of the beans when his father came along, looked at me, and asked what in thunder I was doing. I explained. Giving me a fatherly pat he said, "Feed him the snappers. He deserves it."

Venison was a staple in those years. I struggled to cut up a deer, but soon learned that it didn't matter much what it looked like as long as you used plenty of onions.. We bought our onions by the fifty-pound bag.

There were lots of chokecherries, free for the picking. I found I needed to adapt the jelly recipe to accommodate the tartness of the berries, but after a couple of batches of chokecherry syrup, which the men ate anyway, chokecherry jelly was with us always.

There were other gifts of nature—mushrooms, huckleberries, and the accidental reaping from abandoned pioneer orchards. One of the fellows kept talking about how good grouse was, but I noticed he never brought one home. I wanted to can huckleberries, so, assured that she always took first prize at the county fair, I asked the advice of a neighbor. Very helpful, detailed instructions followed. My canned huckleberries took first prize. Hers took second. I let word get out that it was probably the cute little jar, but I'm not sure she believed it.

The years have passed, and we have children and grandchildren who serve up mouth-watering goodies.. They venture into new ways as they come along—there are microwaves, blenders, and crock pots now so even kids can cook. But I wonder if they are missing something--they will never cozy up to a wood stove, or learn to cook with an axe.

Bibliography

----The Household Searchlight Recipe Book
Household Searchlight Magazine
Topeka, Kansas 1936



Mining Claim

