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## Article Title: More Than a Potluck: Shared Meals and Community-Building in Rural Nebraska at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

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Article Summary: Shared meals were the cornerstone of events and celebrations in Nebraska's early years, offering rural families a chance to gather, socialize, and escape the lonely drudgery that filled much of their lives.

### Cataloging Information:

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Photographs / Images: a gathering featuring a shared meal (John Nelson photograph); a family picnic; a meal hosted by the Knights Templar in the park at Broken Bow in 1922; families enjoying watermelon or ice cream at a picnic; Luna Kellie; inset household tips from "The Home"; young people, perhaps gathered for a game or a performance; Nelson Potter and his family, Custer County (Solomon Butcher photograph); 1883 picnic of the Fullerton Methodist Church at Wiltse Grove

# MORE THAN A POTLUCK



BY NATHAN B. SANDERSON

Free ice cream and lemonade. These summer-time staples were the highlight of the Wagner Sunday School picnic held in rural Custer County on a warm Wednesday afternoon in June 1910.

MRS. GEORGE MOORE MADE THE ICE CREAM, for which the Sunday School reimbursed her. The picnic's main course, however, was not purchased, as "the ladies brought the baskets and a splendid dinner was served."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the summer, numerous picnics, celebrations, and church events took place in Custer County, many featuring a potluck-style main course. Shared meals, in which families and friends gathered together to eat, drink, and socialize, were an integral part of creating a sense of "community" in rural Nebraska at the turn of the twentieth century.

The traditional history of rural Nebraska in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a story of determined homesteaders scratching out a life, livelihood, and home from the thick prairie sod. Rugged individuals, usually male, broke the land and built farms, ranches, and communities



through the force of their will and constant, never-ending, work. Even in the twenty-first century, rural Nebraskans still pride themselves on a tremendous work ethic, a legacy of their immigrant forefathers who spent hard lives at hard labor. But sweat alone did not build the towns that dot the landscape. Food, games, and celebrations helped make the sod, wood, and bricks of these places into communities of friends and neighbors.

While the traditional story of Nebraska's prairie pioneer heritage lives on, recently other aspects of community-building have come to light. Deborah Fink, in *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940*, argues that frontier life, instead of liberating women and offering them a rough equality with men, in fact reasserted the notion that a woman's "proper" place was in the home. Fink focuses on the ways in which women's

## Shared Meals and Community-Building in Rural Nebraska at the Turn of the Twentieth Century





work, which fundamentally influenced the structure of farming and rural communities, remained subordinate to men's work, at least in the eyes of their husbands and fathers. In numerous instances, Fink points out that food—primarily its acquisition and preparation—was one of the most important elements of a rural Nebraska woman's life.<sup>2</sup> Yet for all her focus on food as it relates to women's lives, the enjoyable aspects of mealtimes fail to come to light. The farmwives in Fink's study often mention preparing meals for ice cream socials, picnics, school events, and funerals, but the importance of food in strengthening families and communities is overlooked.

The study of food and cooking has been on the rise in recent years and new texts have provided valuable insight into the ways what we eat, how we eat it, and where the eating takes place influences our lives. Titles such as *A History of Cooks and Cooking*; *Women, Food, and Families*; and *A History of Food: From Manna to Microwave* have appeared in abundance.<sup>3</sup> No monograph has explored Nebraska cooking in detail, and although most general studies have noted that different types of meals cause different feelings among the participants, few have examined the value of shared meals as a time of bonding and community-building in rural areas.

**A community-wide event was likely the setting where Nelson photographed this family's picnic.**  
NSHS RG3542-102-5

The role of women in rural America has also received a great deal of study in the last twenty years. Works such as Joan Jensen's *Calling this Place Home* and *Promise to the Land*; Cornelia Flora, Jan Flora, and Susan Fey's *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*; Sandra Schackel's *Western Women's Lives*; Nancy Grey Osterund's *Bonds of Community*; and many others have explored women's roles in rural areas and examined the ways in which their lives give insight into the larger story of the growth and development of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these and many other important works, the relationship between shared meals and the sense of "community" in rural areas of Nebraska has been ignored. The towns that dot the Nebraska landscape may have been built on sweat and determination, but once the work had ended, celebrations with food, games, and socializing solidified that work as the product of an entire community. These events took on various forms, but almost all featured a shared meal as its centerpiece. Shared meals were the cornerstone of celebrations in Nebraska's early years, offering women and their families a chance to gather,

Pages 120-21:

**This photograph of a gathering featuring a shared meal was taken by Ericson, Nebraska, photographer John Nelson sometime in the early twentieth century. The people and places in most of the Nelson photographs, including those in this article, remain unidentified.** NSHS RG3542-1-2-11

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## *he offered whatever his wife happened to be cooking.*

socialize, enjoy a meal and a conversation, and escape from the lonely drudgery that filled much of their lives. An examination of the meals they shared offers a glimpse into their lives and gives us a fuller understanding of life, leisure, and work around the turn of the twentieth century.

For rural Nebraska families during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, any chance for social interaction was an important event. Settlers often lived miles from their nearest neighbor and the steady labor required to keep up a homestead offered few opportunities for leisure activities. As D. Sven Nordin observed in *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867–1900*, “a farmer’s lot in the nineteenth century was noted more for its backbreaking work than for its pleasurable aspects.” Isolation from relatives, friends, and neighbors brought mental and emotional suffering to many homesteaders; loneliness, the perceived desolation of the land, and the difficulty of making money on a new claim drove many to escape the plains any way they could.<sup>5</sup> To reduce feelings of seclusion and isolation, rural Nebraskans engaged in many social activities that combined work, food, and entertainment. Events such as barn raisings, corn huskings, quilting parties, Grange meetings, church activities, and school functions offered an opportunity to enjoy the company of others, if only for a short time. At these events meals in which each family brought food to share with the entire group were commonplace.

Whether providing a harvest-season lunch break, an after-meeting social hour, a holiday feast, or a weekend supper, these group meals offered participants something beyond physical nourishment; they helped develop collections of rural settlers into communities. These events gave individuals the chance to converse, conduct business, discuss politics, air grievances, meet new people, and engage in sports and other recreational activities; they became celebrations of friendship and community. In the act of sharing food, rural families entered into unique relationships that strengthened the bonds between individuals who had limited opportunities for recreation. These meals became unifying events in the lives of rural Nebraskans because they drew families together and created an environment in which differences such as language, religion, and ethnicity could be set aside. Potlucks helped turn groups of families who lived in proximity to one another into communities of friends and neighbors.

Shared meals, in the way that Nebraskans knew them, existed under a myriad of different names.

As “a meal for which participants share the responsibility of providing the food and taking it to the meal-site,” early residents knew them as “bring a basket” picnics, chip-in dinners, pitch-in suppers, shared picnics, or simply basket meals.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, these meals became known to many Nebraskans as “potlucks.” Before taking on this meaning, a potluck meal meant (and still does, in some places) literally “taking the luck of the pot.” If a man invited a friend home for potluck, he offered whatever his wife happened to be cooking. In print, the term can be traced to the sixteenth century, although its origins likely extend back even farther. In Europe during the early Middle Ages, servants at large estates cooked food in a massive cauldron, left hanging over the fire for days at a time. As Reay Tannahill noted in *Food in History*, “[t]he cauldron, probably, was the original stockpot or *pot-au-feu*, providing an ever-changing broth enriched daily with whatever happened to be available, and very rarely cleared out except in preparation for the meatless weeks of Lent.”<sup>7</sup> The regular addition of new food to the pot changed its flavor constantly, possibly leading to the phrase, “to take pot-luck.”

Later, the term “potluck” was also used as a general luck-of-the-draw phrase in various parts of the United States. Jack London, for example, used the word in such a manner in his 1901 short story “The God of His Fathers.” In the story, a small group of whites face long odds of survival in a confrontation with an Indian band. One man mentions to a companion, “if the woman and the kid cross the divide to-night they might as well be prepared for pot-luck. A long shot, Bill, between ourselves, but nothing lost if it misses.” London wrote the story sometime in early 1900, suggesting a general knowledge of the term by that time.<sup>8</sup> Most Nebraska newspapers did not begin referring to shared meals as “potlucks” until the 1930s or later, but taking “well-filled baskets” to birthdays, threshings, picnics, county fairs, church gatherings, barn-raisings, and even funerals was common around the turn of the twentieth century. Although participants in some communities referred to these meals as “bring a basket” picnics or shared meals rather than “potluck suppers,” the idea of each family bringing food for distribution among the entire group existed in small towns and rural communities across the state, in numerous forms, and for dozens of different events.

In the early 1900s women in rural Nebraska communities served these meals on countless occasions. In Geneva, the county seat of Fillmore

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County, residents brought “baskets well filled with good things to eat” as birthday surprises for local residents. For “Mrs. Fred Whittier’s birthday” on March 24, 1908, a number of community women, including “Madams Oberkotter, C. Stollendorf, Lentfer, H. Bohlen, J. Bohlen, Gerken, Evert and B. Toblassen” brought food items for the party. The ladies “[a]ll enjoyed themselves very much and when they left wished [Mrs. Whittier] many happy returns.” Less than a month later the *Nebraska Signal* carried news of a birthday celebration for two Grand Army of the Republic veterans, Sam Hughey and Mr. Price. Area women again came with “well filled baskets, such as only they know how to prepare to tickle the palate of the G. A. R.” One week later, the local Christian Church congregation held a basket dinner during the noon hour of its all-day church services. The newspaper’s advertisement for the event called for participants to come and “help make this the greatest day of the church year.” Shared meals offered small and large groups the flexibility to provide a meal for every participant, without an undue burden on any individual family.<sup>9</sup>

Because each family brought food to share with everyone, the cost of the meal was distributed evenly, creating an environment where no one individual had a higher status than the rest. Although gender equality was far from equal—the women had prepared the meal, of course—the intra-family equality such meals created helped

form a united, cohesive community. As Fink noted in *Agrarian Women*, “families were the building blocks of society.” Since each family felt on par with its neighbors, the opportunity for a sense of goodwill in the community was much greater and led to a stronger feeling of attachment and friendship. Such friendships were integral at key periods of the year, such as harvest. Again, Fink notes the connection of women, food, work, and community:

Women, who were foremost wives and mothers, participated in rural society in terms of their family roles. When, for example, a farm woman went to her neighbor’s home to help her cook food for a threshing crew that included both of their husbands, they were forming a wider rural social network on the strength of their roles as farm wives. When a mother joined other mothers to provide food for a school party, they came together because of their shared motherhood.<sup>10</sup>

Custer County, in central Nebraska, also had a large number of shared meals and social events. In August 1922 the front page of the *Custer County Chief* featured the results of three picnics, including one enjoyed by members of the Knights Templar. The organization had hosted a “mammoth picnic dinner, which proved to be a sumptuous meal with provisions enough for two or three times the number which participated.” The Modern Woodmen and the Community Club held similar events. That year proved especially memorable



Nelson captured a scene that evokes the “sumptuous meal” hosted by the Knights Templar in the park at Broken Bow in 1922.  
NSHS RG3542-102-17

for the Community Club because it had used the recently built kitchen facilities at the local park for the first time. Members found it “very convenient in preparing their menus.”<sup>11</sup> The “bring a basket” meals enjoyed by these organizations, and the funds spent building the park’s kitchen to host them, points to the importance of these events in the social life of rural communities.

Shared meals were popular in Sherman, Cherry, Adams, Keya Paha, Lincoln, Fillmore, and many other Nebraska counties throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the spring, one-room school houses often used basket meals to celebrate the end of the academic year. At many country schools, “[t]he last day of school was always a gala affair, to which parents brought baskets of food for picnics after the closing exercises had taken place.”<sup>12</sup> Dozens of social and fraternal clubs, including the Scottish Rite Masons, Knights Templar, Modern Woodmen, and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows held shared meals at their meetings or during summer picnics where “nearly all brought baskets or hampers filled with those good things so essential to a successful picnic.”<sup>13</sup> Old settlers’ clubs hosted potluck picnics along the banks of the North Loup and North Platte Rivers, agriculture societies and farmers’ clubs enjoyed shared suppers in pastures and fields, domestic societies entertained in potluck fashion in opera houses, religious congregations held basket meals in parks and on the church lawn, and after the re-emergence of the Nebraska Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry in 1911, Grange chapters ate these meals during the “social hour” following their meetings.

For more than a few rural families, the Grange hall and the meals it hosted became the keys to building a strong, close-knit community. As Max E. Malone noted in *The Grange in Nebraska*, “the Grange meeting night was the major social event of the community. Along with the church and school, they were the bonds that held the community together.”<sup>14</sup> Shared meals were the lynchpins of these bonds. At Grange meetings, grain farmers, cattlemen, and other agriculturists gathered to discuss issues relevant to their livelihoods. Once the business ended, most members stayed to socialize. Often, families traveled together to these gatherings, which became important social events for the entire area. While the men discussed topics such as business, the weather, commodity prices, and politics, the women prepared the food they brought for the meal, talking as they worked. Women often participated in business discussions

as well, and several earned leadership positions in Nebraska Grange chapters. Even though women could (and did) hold leadership roles, they alone provided the meals.

For both men and women, however, the after-business meal calmed tempers and restored the camaraderie lost during heated debates over con-



**Judging from the tubs in the foreground of this Nelson photograph, the families may be enjoying watermelon or ice cream as part of their summertime picnic.** NSHS RG3542-102-12

troversial issues. During the meetings, competing arguments often emerged. But as one former Grange member noted, the “[f]requent differences of opinion in Grange meetings, which appear to threaten the harmony of the group by the intensity of their discussion, are happily reconciled through the medium of the social hour of refreshment and good fellowship which follows the business session.”<sup>15</sup> The shared meal provided time for antagonists’ feeling to moderate and invited more relaxed conversation to begin, easing tense situations and producing an atmosphere of solidarity and good will. Post-meeting potlucks acted as buffers for hot tempers and gave Nebraska Grange members the opportunity to mend rifts that could have pushed the chapters apart. Instead, Grange halls became important social places for rural Nebraskans, who saw them as “one of the few places where the whole family may attend together for sociability, education and meet other families on a common level.”<sup>16</sup>

That shared meals occurred at “farmers’ picnics or Grange field meetings, which, on scale large and small, have brought together during the summer

*At many country schools, “the last day of school was always a gala affair, to which parents brought baskets of food for picnics after the closing exercises had taken place.”*

season thousands of Patrons and their friends at convenient grove or lakeside, to spend a congenial summer day," seems logical, given their inherent advantages for meal preparation and organization.<sup>17</sup> Shared meals were ideal for events in rural, agricultural communities because they distributed costs evenly and made meal planning a virtual non-factor. Unlike large banquets or feasts, which required much time to organize and significant funds to put together, potluck-style meals were inexpensive and needed little planning beyond, "bring a basket to share." Rural families also enjoyed the informal adaptability of shared meals. They could be organized quickly, and families were not burdened with any pre-determined dish to prepare. Weather and growing seasons could prove unpredictable, and a meal featuring in-season fruits, garden produce, or other foods that required little preparation offered great flexibility, an important consideration during the agriculture cycles of planting, growing, and harvesting that limited the number of potential foodstuffs.

In addition to time savings, a shared meal's low cost made it an excellent option for large gatherings and social events. During times of low commodity prices or drought, cost could be the most important consideration for hosting a celebration. Because each family "paid their way" with the food they brought to the meal, everyone was assured an opportunity to participate, regardless of financial resources. In this manner, shared meals blurred class lines and encouraged the participation of newcomers who could not afford to attend a gathering that required cash payment. This arrangement did much to create a sense of community.

In her memoirs, Luna (Sanford) Kellie, a former state secretary of the Nebraska Farmers Alliance, recalled a potluck-type event during her first summer on the Great Plains in 1876. In late June Kellie's family joined several of their Adams County neighbors to observe the nation's centennial. They "wanted to celebrate and did not have the money to fix up their families to go off to some town celebration and thought they might get together and have a picnic and good time at the Mayflower school house." Although she looked forward to the event, the nineteen-year-old was anxious as well. She had only been in the state for a few weeks and did not have any clothes fit for a celebration. In addition, Kellie's father asked her to read the Declaration of Independence in front of the entire group. She recalled, "I told him I had no clothes. I really did not have a new thing that

summer and hat and all must be old-fashioned I knew and to get up before the audience that way I nearly fainted."<sup>18</sup>

Eventually, Kellie agreed to attend and the preparations began. Her father cut green willow branches from Sand Creek to construct a bower and went into Juniata—the nearest town—to purchase items so Kellie could "make a good picnic dinner." She "baked a large pan of light biscuits, roasted one of Pa's few light Brahma hens with lots of dressing, made a large cake with loads of raisins and some kind of pie so I kept busy and had after all my worries a very good dinner." When Kellie arrived at the school on the morning of June 25, she saw the extent of the preparations for the first time. Two large bowers, each twelve feet wide, sat near the wooden school building, music stands and a speaker's podium had been built nearby, and the "whole was well covered with green boughs and was quite artistic as well as practicable." After each family unloaded their food into the schoolhouse and made the babies comfortable, the festivities began. Several speeches were delivered, including a reading of the Declaration of Independence (not by Kellie). A band played several pieces, and the entire group sang patriotic songs.<sup>19</sup>

Lunchtime was an informal affair. The families spread their dinners on desks and the entire group ate together. This type of meal surprised Kellie, especially when her father "brought up some men and boys who did not seem to have women folks there and insisted on feeding them while he sampled other people's cooking. In fact I think most of the men did the same. I know a good many had a piece of my large fruit cake and women also tasted of this and that of the others and all had a jolly good time." The adults spent the afternoon in the same manner as the morning, while the children played games. All had an enjoyable time until "at last the lowering sun forced us to disband and the Centennial Celebration at Mayflower closed with music by the band."<sup>20</sup>

This celebration—Kellie's first social event in Nebraska—influenced the rest of her life. At the gathering she met and became friends with Mrs. Strohl, a woman who would become "my best friend for nearly 50 years." "Without that friendship that day begun," she wrote, "I know I must have fainted and dropped by the wayside ere many years had flown."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the social interaction afforded during shared mealtimes often had a profound influence on people's lives. Although attended by a handful of families lacking clothes



Luna Kellie recalled the 1876 centennial celebration at Mayflower School in Adams County, where a meal was shared and friendships made, as a major influence on her life. About two years after this 1892 portrait, Kellie was elected state secretary of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance. NSHS RG3914-3

good enough for a "town celebration," this event characterized the confluence of food, family, and community in rural Nebraska.

Kellie's experience also illustrates the relaxation and socializing that women enjoyed during shared meals. Often rural women did not get a chance to sit down and eat with the family, as they spent much of their time waiting on the men. Shared meals eliminated this necessity because of their informal nature. Women had more free time during the meal, which they could spend in conversation with friends, neighbors, and new acquaintances. Potluck-style meals gave women the flexibility to enjoy themselves without guilt.<sup>22</sup>

Just like the small group at the Mayflower school, entire communities often gathered for shared meals during important celebrations. On August 11, 1921, the Custer County Volunteer Fireman's Association held their first annual picnic near Lake Ansley, in central Nebraska. According to the *Custer County Chief*, since the get-together "was the initial appearance of this newly formed organization in public, the affair created community wide interest and a splendid attendance was the result. Over fifteen hundred people were on the grounds and took part in the festivities . . . All took along well filled baskets and at noon a general spread was had in the park."<sup>23</sup> The Custer County Fireman's Association probably could not have afforded to host a banquet for fifteen hundred people. A "bring a basket" meal enabled the association to hold a large gathering and easily feed everyone with minimum expense.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, food held a prominent position in women's lives, both in small towns and outlying areas. Cooking occupied a key place in the construction of a rural woman's self-image because often, it was her main occupation. Luna Kellie noted the monotony of life in a sod house on the prairie in the late mid-1870s. "The days seemed very long," she wrote. "There was nothing to read. There were few weeds in the garden on the new sod and no material to sew, only some patching." During her first few weeks on the plains, with no chores to finish and little other distraction, cooking was by far the most important activity in her day. She also noted that this "chore" was women's work. A man would only undertake such pursuits if he was a bachelor, or when his wife took sick.<sup>24</sup>

Later, rural newspapers reinforced the connection between women and food. Advertisements for flour, sugar, canned goods, food preservation products, and "the latest" cooking accoutrements

# The Home



When a hurried but good dessert is needed, try cheese crackers. Put grated cheese on the crackers, set them in the hot oven or put them under the broiler until the cheese toast a light brown. Serve either hot or cold.

Before sending to the laundry stitch plaiting on wash waists and jabots into original plaits on the outer edge with coarse chain stitch, and after washed and pressed into plaits again rip stitchings and draw edge of plaitings between thumb and finger to remove stiff platted effect.

"The Home," and similar columns published in many rural newspapers, featured recipes and household tips for women. *Loup City Northwestern*, October 27, 1910

filled their columns cover to cover. Recipes, instructions for properly reheating leftovers, and "new" ways to prepare traditional meals could be found on almost every page. Editors from all parts of the state peppered their weekly papers with hints and advice for women on how to plan and cook a successful meal. Throughout the early 1910s, for example, the *Loup City Northwestern* ran three or more recipes weekly. The paper featured preparation suggestions for beans, potatoes, pudding, rhubarb, apples, and biscuits as well as various jellies, deserts, cakes, drinks, and sweets. All of these recipes appeared in "The Home" section, a part of the newspaper devoted exclusively to women. Intermixed among the recipes appeared advertisements for cleaning products, tips for saving time around the house, methods for improving the laundry, and techniques for creating a more attractive home.<sup>25</sup>

Some newspapers even suggested that good cooking was the key to a happy marriage. In the fall of 1911, the *Custer County Chief* ran an article by a priest who argued that poor cooking caused greater distress between husband and wife than spousal disagreements. He contended that “bread of armor plate consistency is often more a source of marital unhappiness than the more familiar incompatibility of temperament.”<sup>26</sup> In this context, shared meals also provided opportunities for women to demonstrate their importance to the community and showcase their culinary talent. In addition to providing a chance to leave the homestead, catch up with friends, and enjoy an afternoon of fun and conversation, shared meals offered women the chance to exchange recipes and food preparation ideas with their peers. Although these events did little to place women’s work on an equal footing with that of their husbands’, shared meals gave both men and women the chance to interact with others and strengthen community ties through the unifying act of breaking bread.

Shared meals were not community-building events simply because they brought together families to consume food or try new recipes. Equally as important were the recreational activities that took place before, during, and after the meal. In addition to cost distribution and planning ease, shared meals offered families an opportunity to engage in activities such as sports and games. Almost all out-

door picnics included some type of athletic event, including baseball games, horse racing, sack races, three-legged races, and water fights. Men, women, and children all participated in these activities. The 1921 Custer County Fireman’s picnic had a program following the meal that “consisted of two [base]ball games, swimming and foot races, a horseshoe tournament and other out door sports.”<sup>27</sup> Outside of school, social events like potluck-style meals gave rural children the opportunity to interact with kids their own age, an important play time for youngsters who often lived miles from the nearest neighbor. Given the difficulty in finding enough players to field a baseball team in areas far from town, shared meals were special events because they drew enough participants to play games with nine-man squads. Not surprisingly, baseball proved especially popular at shared meals throughout Nebraska.<sup>28</sup>

After the meal and some type of athletic event, communities often ended their celebration with a dance. When residents of Sparks, Nebraska, completed the town’s first church in September 1888, they organized a celebration that proved so successful it became an annual event, later known as the Old Settlers’ Picnic or the Cherry and Keya Paha County Old Settlers’ Reunion. Etta Simons, a local resident, described that inaugural gathering: “A long table was made of boards and everyone ate together. There was a feast such as country people can put together and no charge for any-

The young people posing for John Nelson’s camera, including more than enough boys to make a baseball team, were attending an event that drew a large crowd. A shared meal likely preceded games, musical performances, or an athletic contest, activities that gave rural children an opportunity to interact with kids their own age. NSHS RG3542-102-8



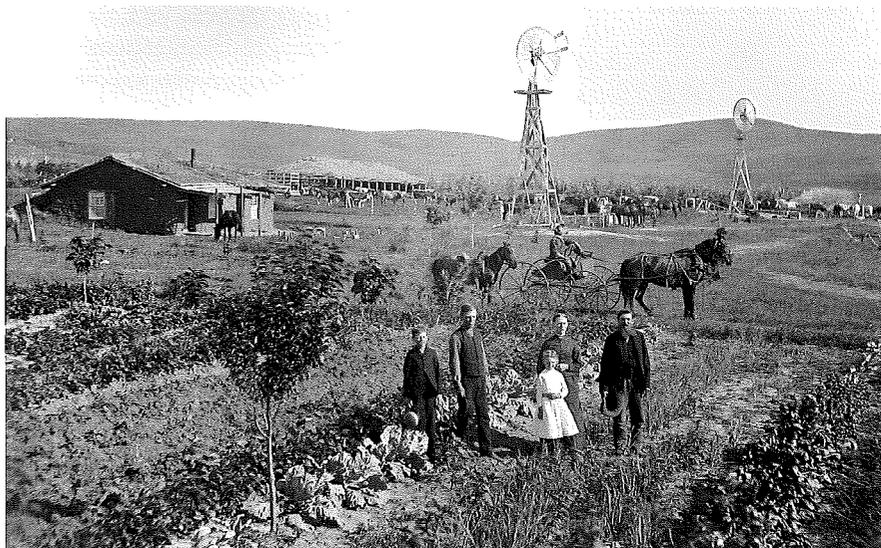
## *the women and children ate what was left.”*

thing.” The participants sat side-by-side on plank seats “and folks had dinner together.” The activities included a “bowery dance, ball games, horse races and small sports.” Eventually this local celebration became a multi-county affair, with a fairgrounds and perimeter fence, including a gated entrance where participants paid admission.<sup>29</sup> From an intimate gathering in the late nineteenth century to a grand community spectacle decades later, for local residents this event moved well beyond a simple meal; it became a key part of the community’s social life.

Not all shared meals were held during times of celebration or recreation, however. They often occurred during multiple-family work events such as barn raisings and brandings, as well as at harvest and planting times. A woman who lived in Cherry County in the early 1900s reminisced about her experiences as a young girl during the harvest season: “While the threshing crew of about 8–10 men were busy working up an appetite, the women folks were busy getting quantities of home prepared foods ready such as dressing friers [*sic*], baking pies, vegetables from the garden, [and] home made bread and butter, truly a feast.” Because the family had no refrigerator, “everything had to be prepared fresh each day.” When noon arrived, the men washed and ate, while the women and children waited on them. Once “the men had finished, the women and children ate what was left.” Then they cleared the table and washed the dishes.<sup>30</sup>

As families in rural areas gathered to help one another with important agricultural tasks, each brought the products of their own land—meat, vegetables, and bread—in addition to the labor of each family member. They shared the experiences of work and food, strengthening their social ties at the same time. The associations formed during one barn raising or threshing often led to other joint activities between friends and neighbors. Work that required multiple hands to complete could occur only within a social network of families that knew each other and could get along together. Shared meals were an instrumental part of this process.

A rural community’s social ties seemed most apparent at times of celebration—such as when congregations dedicated churches or residents celebrated Independence Day—and times of loss—such as when loved ones died or a family moved away from the community. Before a family left, “a farewell pot-luck dinner, and one last visit was in order.”<sup>31</sup> Shared meals and the interaction



**Rural families brought homegrown food to a potluck meal. Solomon D. Butcher photographed Nelson Potter and his family in the garden on their Custer County farm. NSHS RG2608-1357**

they fostered helped provide a sense of closure before a family left town. And the bonds they helped establish created vast social networks that extended throughout the state and the Great Plains. Celebrations were the most common times for shared meals and they often helped mark special occasions. In rural communities across Nebraska, “[w]hen a new preacher moved to town there was a pound party. Everyone took a pound of something to a welcome party in his home.”<sup>32</sup> In 1908 the English Methodist Church and the German Methodist Church near Kilgore, in north-central Nebraska, merged. The two former congregations pooled their resources and began constructing a church building to house the new United Methodist congregation. After more than a year of work, the congregation completed the new structure. Members dedicated their church in June 1910, and on that “Dedication Sunday a carry-in dinner was held at noon, with the Dedication of the new church home in the afternoon.”<sup>33</sup>

While the meal the German and English Methodists held was not the source of their unification, it helped solidify it. Shared meals, such as the one in Kilgore, were the medium that brought people together and allowed them to share their experiences and celebrate their triumphs. As folklorist Linda T. Humphrey noted in her article, “Small Group Festive Gatherings,” “[P]eople use food as a catalyst for social interaction.” The festive gatherings she studied, which include picnics, church socials, potlucks, taffy pulls, box socials, reunions,

oyster suppers, progressive dinners, and cocktail parties, all share two common characteristics: food and social interaction. During communal meals, participants built relationships that could not be replicated elsewhere. At rural potluck meals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, community-wide socializing helped encourage intimate and meaningful communication between individuals, which created cohesion. Sharing emotions and making meaningful connections with others was an important part of rural life. Shared meals facilitated that process.<sup>34</sup>



When church congregations gathered for social or religious fellowship, potluck-style meals were often served. The 1883 picnic of the Fullerton Methodist Church at Wiltse Grove featured a band for entertainment. NSHS RG4500-30-1

Nebraskans used “basket meals” to develop a sense of community for many of the same reasons that they attended church services. As Daniel Sack argued in *Whitebread Protestants*, for many people “participating in a community is often the most important motivation for attending church, and shared meals are often more important to creating community than are shared worship experiences.”<sup>35</sup> Communication, achieving a sense of community, making connections with their neighbors, and having fun were all powerful motivations for rural towns to host these events.

Gathering for a meal, fellowship, conversation, and entertainment had an impact outside of the individual communities as well. Complex social networks developed, uniting the inhabitants of rural towns that were miles apart. In 1911, in celebration of the Nebraska Grange’s return as a productive organization, the Custer County Grange chapters hosted a “Big Gathering” at a tree grove near the Tappan Valley schoolhouse. Nine different

chapters attended the event, which featured a “bring a basket” picnic dinner and program of sports that included “a game of baseball, tugs of war, foot races, [a] bonnet race, penny shower, and other sports and amusements.”<sup>36</sup> Grangers traveled long distances to meet other members at this event, no doubt strengthening the organization’s communication network and reinforcing its goals. Such large communal meals enabled residents from towns fifty miles away or more to share experiences, ideas, and cuisine that could not be exchanged under other circumstances.

One year after the Custer County Volunteer Fireman’s Association hosted fifteen hundred people for a shared meal and entertainment in 1921, three thousand people attended the 1922 fireman’s picnic. According to the *Custer County Chief*,

People were there from all over the county and across the county line. Everybody brought huge baskets of food and the community ladies of the city served free coffee with cream and sugar during the day and evening. Ice water was served all day. The fireman without a cent in his pockets fared just as well as his brother with hundreds; because everything was free to the boys and their badges were open sesame to all places of amusement.<sup>37</sup>

Even single men who failed to bring baskets left with full stomachs. At these events, social interaction and community trumped a person’s individual contribution to the celebration.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rural Nebraska towns hosted scores of shared meals on church lawns, parks, and inside public buildings such as opera houses and Grange halls. Residents of Broken Bow, Arnold, Geneva, Loup City, Bellevue, and other towns across the state solidified their communities during “bring a basket” meals and the athletic events and dances that accompanied them. Participants at these events brought and consumed a meal, but they also made conversation, exchanged ideas, renewed old friendships, introduced new members into the community, and strengthened kinship ties. Potluck-style meals helped foster the transition from collections of families living near one another to social networks of friends and neighbors. When individuals from different backgrounds, occupations, and life experiences came together and ate each other’s food, the gathering became a unifying event. The widespread appeal of shared meals, their ease in preparation, and

their role in building community made them important events in the social life of rural Nebraska families. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Custer County Chief* (Broken Bow, Nebr.), June 24, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Symons, *A History of Cooks and Cooking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food, and Families* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1988); and Margaret Leeming, *A History of Food: From Manna to Microwave* (London: BBC Books, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> See Joan Jensen, *Calling this Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850-1925* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006); Jensen, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L. Flora, and Susan Fey, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003); Sandra Schackel, *Western Women's Lives: Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003); and Nancy Grey Osterund, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> D. Sven Nordin, *Rich Harvest: A History of the Grange, 1867-1900* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1974), 109. Escape for many involved leaving the area for good. Escape for others meant suicide. For a popular firsthand account of both forms of escape in western Nebraska, see Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Wallace Kelsey, "Ring the Doorbell With Your Elbow: A Light-Hearted Look at the American Potluck Meal" in Harlan Walker, ed., *The Meal: Proceedings on the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, 2001* (Devon, England: Prospect Books, 2002), 134.

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Palmatier, *Food: A Dictionary of Literal and Nonliteral Terms* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 357, and Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Jack London, "The God of His Fathers," first published in *McClure's Magazine* 17 (May 1901), and Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III, and I. Milo Shepard, eds., *The Letters of Jack London* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1:153. Herman Melville also used the term "potluck" in his classic work, *Moby Dick*, in two different contexts. Early in the novel, when Ishmael describes his decision to go to Nantucket and board a whaling ship, he describes the reaction of his new companion, Queequeg: "He at once resolved to accompany me to that island, ship aboard the same vessel, get into the same watch, the same boat, the same mess with me, in short to share my every hap; with both my hands in his, boldly dip into the Potluck of both worlds." Here, Melville uses "potluck" as an example of a "luck-of-the-draw" phrase. A few pages later, he again uses the term, but in this instance it refers to actual food in a pot. When Ishmael and Queequeg are looking for room and board in Nantucket, they met a man who "plainly hinted that we could not possibly do better than try pot-luck at the Try Pots." See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or the White Whale* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1980), 71, 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Nebraska Signal* (Geneva, Nebr.), Mar. 27, 1908; Apr. 3 and 10, 1908.

<sup>10</sup> Fink, *Agrarian Women*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Custer County Chief*, Aug. 17, 1922.

<sup>12</sup> Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of Nebraska, Pamphlet 30, *Nebraska Folklore, Written and Compiled by the Nebraska Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, Federal Works Agency. Sponsored by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Drawings by Todros Geller* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Woodruff Printing Company, 1939).

<sup>13</sup> *Custer County Chief*, Aug. 11, 1921.

<sup>14</sup> Max E. Malone, *The Grange in Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Joe Christensen, Inc., 1987), 22, 90.

<sup>15</sup> Charles M. Gardner, *The Grange: Friend of the Farmer, 1867-1947* (Washington, D.C.: The National Grange, 1949), 222.

<sup>16</sup> Malone, *Grange in Nebraska*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Gardner, *The Grange*, 222.

<sup>18</sup> Luna Kellie, *A Prairie Populist: The Memoirs of Luna Kellie*, ed. Jane Taylor Nelsen (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Charles and Kerr, *Women, Food, and Families*, 20. The authors note that modern-day women often do not get a chance to sit down and enjoy a meal with their family. This monograph is based on a study in England during the 1980s, but some of the conclusions—especially regarding women's attitudes toward meal preparation and serving—seem applicable to nineteenth-century Nebraska.

<sup>23</sup> *Custer County Chief*, Aug. 18, 1921.

<sup>24</sup> Kellie, *Prairie Populist*, 13. She wrote about the rare occasions when her husband J. T. cooked—when she was sick and during the winter when the extreme cold confined Luna and the children to bed. At these times, only two meals—not the usual three—were prepared each day.

<sup>25</sup> *Loup City (Nebr.) Northwestern*, 1910 to 1912.

<sup>26</sup> *Custer County Chief*, Sept. 1, 1911.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 18, 1921.

<sup>28</sup> Communities around Nebraska held baseball games at almost every summertime potluck-type event. See the *Nebraska Signal* and *Exeter Enterprise*, the *Custer County Chief*, and the *Loup City Northwestern* from 1908 to 1925 for abundant examples.

<sup>29</sup> *Potluck Papers: Cherry County Heritage Book* (Valentine, Nebr.: The Council, 1974), 60, 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>31</sup> Dickens, Nebraska, Centennial Committee, *A Century of Memories, 1889-1989, Dickens, Nebraska* (Dickens: The Committee, 1989), 158.

<sup>32</sup> Louise Pound, *Nebraska Folklore* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 196.

<sup>33</sup> *Potluck Papers*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Linda T. Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 16 (September-December, 1979): 190, 192.

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 62.

<sup>36</sup> *Custer County Chief*, Aug. 25, 1911.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 10, 1922.

