



Journey through Thyme

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Columnist

Cooking – and quilts – on the Overland Trail

Imagine yourself back in the days of the Oregon Trail, where every spring pioneers gathered at St. Joseph, Missouri, and Council Bluffs, Iowa, to begin a 2,000-mile journey westward.

Those pioneers spent months preparing for their trip. Men saw to the wagons, animals, weapons, farm equipment and tools. The women salted meats and dried fruits and corn, purchased coffee and beans and barrels of sugar and flour. They packed dishes, clothing, utensils, needles and thread.

In fact, besides cooking, a great deal of sewing was done while traveling and each woman and child usually had 2-3 quilts for a variety of purposes. While some quilts were packed as treasures in trunks, others were

kept nearby for daily use. Stitched into those quilts was the rich heritage of thrifty self-sufficient women who helped homestead the land.

A woman's role on the trail wasn't much different from her role in the home; it merely involved more work in the most primitive conditions.

When the men and women loaded their wagons, they had more to think about than packing the usual 200 pounds of flour, 75 pounds of bacon, 25 pounds of sugar, 10 pounds of rice, 10 pounds of salt, five pounds of coffee, half a bushel of dried beans, one bushel of dried fruit, half a bushel of cornmeal and maybe two pounds of saleratus (baking soda). They needed to know if the sugar had to be sifted before use, if bacon would spoil or if it was possible to make an eggless pudding over an open fire. They had to decide which mill ground the best flour and if the "meat biscuits" advertised for sale in the local newspaper were as good as the newspaper reported.

Non-perishable food was the mainstay of the long journey, whether by land or sea. Without refrigeration or any means for keeping fresh foods cold, pioneers on the trail had to rely on salted meats, pickled vegetables, dried fruit, bread (hardtack) and coffee.

Traveling in a self-contained wagon that carried all the cooking supplies had certain advantages. When the family/group decided to stop for meals, instead of

spending time looking for food, the travelers focused their attention on preparing the meal and on finding a suitable campsite near fresh water. Simply making a cup of coffee at the end of a long day required that someone fill the container with clean water, gather some fuel and start a fire and grind and roast the coffee beans.

Cooking was time consuming and often lasted far into the night. Even with the proper cooking gear and utensils, cooking over a campfire for months on end was not easy.

But an impressive amount of cooking was accomplished during the four to six months of camping, and baking was on the top of the list. And whether they were housekeeping at home or on the trail, most 19th-century women regularly baked bread and pies.

In order to make their bread and cakes rise, the travelers very carefully packed saleratus. Saleratus is potassium or sodium bicarbonate, a chalk-like substance similar to baking soda.

While not nearly as important as flour as survival food, everyone carried sugar. Pies, cakes, and jams from fresh berries picked along the way were frequently made on the trail.

Pies placed a close second in the baking department next to bread. And apple pie headed the list, but mince, pumpkin, peach, currant and pot pies were mentioned in diaries and letters. The fruit used was usually dried, except on those days when

someone gathered fresh berries. Even though baking pies involved mixing dough, making a crust, stewing fruit and lighting a fire, pies were such a part of the American cuisine that women were expected to make them for most meals. A Dutch oven made an excellent pie pan, and pies could be either fried or baked.

Next to bread, bacon was the food most eaten — often on the menu twice a day.

Parched corn and cornmeal scored high on the list of commodities because they were easy to cook with and did not spoil or turn sour.

Lacy-edged corn pancakes were one of the pioneer recipes made from cornmeal:

Mix a cup of white cornmeal and half a teaspoon each of baking soda and salt.

Add an egg and 1-1/4 cup of buttermilk to make the batter.

Melt a tablespoon of lard or bacon fat in a hot skillet.

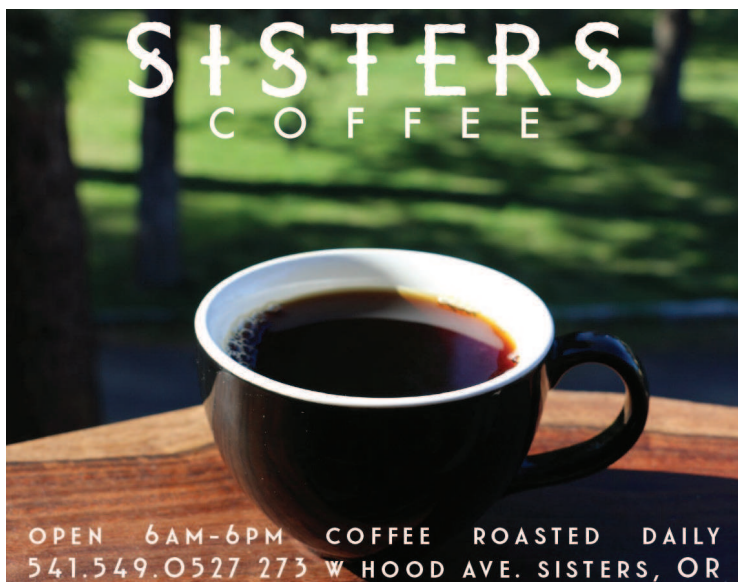
Wait for the shortening to smoke before pouring

tablespoons of batter; give each batter a distance of six inches in the pan.

After getting used to cooking in a cast iron pan over an open fire, some women got creative and liked to show off their cooking skills by flipping their pancakes in the air and catching them in the pan on their way down.

Some pioneers on the trail made a quick bread called bread-on-a-stick. The dough, a mixture of flour and water, was prepared right in the flour sack. The cook then inserted a stick in the bag and scooped and twisted up some dough until it clung to the end. To bake the bread-on-a-stick, the cook would stick it in the ground right next to the fire, turning it occasionally so it wouldn't burn.

On the trail many imaginative pioneer women became skillful cooks as they adapted recipes and used available foods in order to feed their families.



Oregonians read their local newspapers

81.8% report 2+ people inside/outside of their home read their copy of the local newspaper

These results, published 3-12-18, combine answers from 308 Oregon adults, ages 18+ who participated in a Pulse Marketing Survey. Information provided Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association.

