

The Heritage Cooking Series

Breaking bread in the Low Country

by P. Elizabeth Wilson*

As the fog began to lift higher and higher and the sun peered through the thick clouds, we could see a boat, tiny in the distance. We knew within minutes we would sail across 35 miles, northeast of Savannah, and break on Daufuskie Island after all.

Daufuskie Island, known for its deviled crab, is said to be all of 100 years behind civilization. Even today you can see ox-driven carts. The homes of a large majority of the 30 or so Black families are built of logs and located several miles apart. A few years ago the people formed the Daufuskie Island Cooperative, Incorporated and built a fine general store and adjoining pavilion. It is here in the pavilion that deviled crab is prepared and purchased, usually by the half-dozen, tucked in the safest of places and carried away to be savored at another time. While on the island, tourists dine on deviled crab, red rice and cole slaw.

On Daufuskie we had the pleasure of talking at length with Ms. Francis Jones who is a life-long resident of the Low Country. A retired school teacher, Ms. Jones is an active community leader, a board member of the Cooperative, and lovingly revered as the "old soldier."

Ms. Jones related how country establishments were largely self-sustaining on the island, that local specialties served on these tidewater tables were taken from the family's vegetable gardens and rice patch—okra, tomatoes, butter beans, squash and eggplant, and, of course, rice. They hunted for deer, coon, squirrels, rabbits and fished for seafood that they prepared "every which-a-way." Her favorite cuisine was stewed cabbage that she still steams down with a little salt pork.

Thyme, mint, catnip, parsley and garlic are herbs very common to the Low Country. Ms. Jones remembers her grandmother making bread pudding and cornstarch pie fillin'. She says they seemed to always have stone-ground grits and corn and home-grown rice. Varieties of peaches, pears and figs were plentiful and wines were made from grapes, plums, blackberries, mulberries and pears. On holidays, oyster stuffing was the thing, although rice or cornmeal was sometimes used.

Still prominent on Daufuskie Island are some of the creative crafts handed down from generation to generation in the form of quilting and basket weaving, in both of which Ms. Jones is quite the expert crafts-person. During the tourist season artifacts exquisitely reflecting Low Country life styles of yesterday and today are on display in the island's pavilion.

Across Calibogue Sound, a heavy fragrance motionless as though having lost its way in the air was fixed above the oven as we entered the home of Mrs. Rosalie Barnwell in



Mrs. Rosalie Barnwell of Hilton Head Island serves a potato pone that could make Christmas an everyday event.

Hilton Head Island. She had prepared an extravagantly rich potato pone that she enjoyed during her childhood much the same as we enjoy fruitcake today. It was the Christmas specialty and it was grand. Potato pone represents one of the many imaginative uses found for the sweet potato decades ago. To this day, many places in the South, if you ask for potatoes will be served sweet potatoes. If you want white potatoes you must say Irish potatoes. Sweet potato dishes from the Low Country are simple but distinctive, subtly seasoned and a welcome change served with the meal or at dessert.

It's not just the potato pone, but Hilton Head Island itself that's grand. Steeped in historical significance, it is alive. With varied wildlife, lush vegetation and is favored with some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Twenty-four plantations were in operation on the island in 1860, most of which cultivated cotton, but also indigo, sugar cane and rice. However, for the past century, the islanders' principal industry has been shrimping, oystering and crabbing.

But no matter how you look at it, Blacks have always been closely associated with the land and the food. Planting, picking, creating and eating. This is especially true of Southerners. Though thousands of dishes are part of our heritage, written recipes for them are surprisingly rare. Consequently, no cookbook will suffice. To discover, then, the wonder of our food heritage, we have to meet the people.

During the time when Hilton Head was simply that narrow belt of land neighboring the Atlantic, the tides would be used to flood and drain the fields that Mrs. Nellie White worked many rains ago. When you see and hear and understand the

strength of mind with which this gracious 83-year-old woman says, "I was a farmer," you sense a period of well-rounded salubrious living and, without hesitation, you fill your bowl with her favorite okra soup. Our visit was beautiful. We learned that the slippery quality cooked okra sometimes takes, liked by some but disliked by most, can be overcome and the full and unusual flavor of okra enjoyed if you cook it in a skillet with some drippings and a little vinegar, stirring constantly.

We also learned from Mrs. White and her daughter Mrs. Barnwell about the big iron pots used to make bennie (sesame) candy; the aroma of hot peas cooking (the portent of something special); grits with oysters, shrimp or fish; hard melon preserves; the days of talking pictures and of taking a sail or steamboat to Savannah to shop. Yes, it was grand.

If only one memory could be formed from our trip, it would be that life in the Low Country has never been short on appetite or regional delicacies to appease it, nor has it been short of a family table around which to enjoy it. Our experience is already reduced to impressions, circled within our personalities and cannot be pierced even by those voices we may conjecture to be coming to us or from us.

We hardly have time to make theories about them. What we have now to do is be forever curiously testing new opinions and recipes and courting new impressions—never yielding to generally accepted views.

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ginger

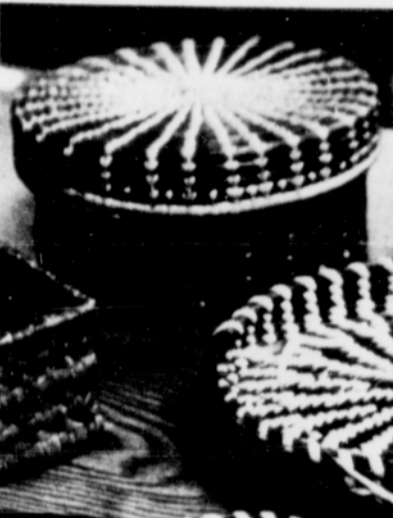
Combine ingredients; mix well. Pour into 10x6-inch baking dish. Bake at 350°, 1 hour and 25 minutes. Serve warm or cold. Six to eight servings.

DEVILED CRAB

3 cups soft bread crumbs
2 6-oz. pkgs. frozen crabmeat, thawed, drained, flaked
1/2 cup chopped celery
1/2 cup mayonnaise
2 tablespoons finely chopped onion
2 teaspoons prepared mustard
1/4 teaspoon cayenne
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons margarine, melted

Combine 2 cups bread crumbs, crabmeat, celery, mayonnaise, onion, mustard and seasonings; mix well. Place mixture in six individual seafood shells or 6-oz. custard cups. Top with remaining bread crumbs tossed with margarine. Bake at 350°, 30 minutes. Six servings.

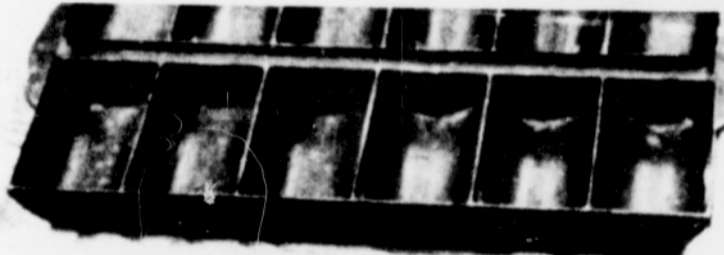
Variation: substitute two 7-oz. cans water-packed tuna for crabmeat.



Low Country craftsmen have been fashioning baskets for centuries. (Photo: Hilton Head Island Public Library.)

SWEET POTATO PONE

4 cups grated sweet potatoes
1/2 cup packed brown sugar
1/2 cup milk
1/4 cup margarine, melted
1/4 cup dark corn syrup
2 eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon grated orange rind



Corn muffin tins used by local Black cooks were among the antiques displayed in a special exhibit, "Reflections of Low Country Life Styles," at the Hilton Head Island Public Library. (Photo: Hilton Head Island Public Library.)

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LOVING MEMORY

Dominic Christopher Joseph
March 14, 1960-August 15, 1978

There are always two sides, the good and the bad,
The dark and the light, the sad and the glad,
But looking back over the good and the bad,
We are aware of the number of good things we've had.

And in counting our blessings, we find when we're through,
We've no reason at all to complain or be blue.
So thank God for the good things he's always done,
And be grateful to him for the battles you've won,
And know that the same God who helped you before,
Is ready and willing to help you once more.

by Dominic 1976 (age 16)

Your Devoted Family
Peggy, Vernon, Roberta—Washington, D.C.
Randell, Harry, Amelia,
Vernon, Sr.—Portland

DO YOU NEED HELP?

Is the DEVIL working against your home, nature, job, church, money, children, sex, neighbor, health, sick, family, loved ones? Are there demons on your body or in your home? Have you been in a fix where you cannot keep or find the RIGHT man or woman? If you need help with any or all of these problems you should call me NOW!! Tomorrow may be too late!! Does your luck pass you by? If so, I have lucky hands to help you be a winner in all GAMES OF CHANCE—Bingo, Reno, Tahoe, Las Vegas, Special, Miami, Fla., etc.

If you are a spiritual seeker who needs help not promises—call me. I am a "God Gifted" man. I can help you in a hurry.

TESTIMONIALS

- 1) Miss Joyce J.W., Portland, OR., was in a fix where she could not find or keep a good man. I, Rev. Hoskins, removed the fix and the jinx from her. NOW she can draw the man of her desire to her like a magnet.
- 2) Mr. & Mrs. C.P. of Compton, CA., could not win the BIG one. They called Rev. Hoskins and Rev. sent them a for-sure win blessing money hand. They went to Las Vegas and their luck kept on coming, winning more than \$16,000.
- 3) Ms. Barbara T., Inglewood, CA., had a man who left home for another woman. She called Rev. Hoskins with tears in her voice. She wanted him back!! Now he is back and eating out of her hand.
- 4) Mr. Paul, Los Angeles, CA., was in a fix and rooted by this woman. As a result he lost his nature for other women, but through Rev. Hoskins' work, Paul regained his nature and became luckier than ever with women, money and his business.
- 5) Mrs. O.L., Long Beach, CA., had demons in her body, and in her home, causing all kinds of bad luck, and unnatural sickness. She called Rev. Hoskins and in 72 hours her home and body were free of unclean spirits.

(The names in the above testimonies have been changed for the protection of the individual.) I guarantee to do what I say I can do. I have a big reputation to protect.

I know the power of the SPIRIT. Don't put it off. Don't let distance keep you from calling. Call now!!! You will be glad you did. Tell a friend where to get HELP today.

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