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# FEEDING COMMUNITY:

# THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S CULINARY LABOUR ON THE GREAT PLAINS FARMING FRONTIER, 1850-1920

By

Kandace Rae Keithley ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts**

in

**History**

DEPARTMENT OF **HISTORY AND CLASSICS**

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**For Mark,**

**who nourishes me**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis shows how women's culinary labour influenced the physical, cultural, social, and economic aspects of developing communities on the Great Plains farming frontier. Women's traditional food related skills were crucial for maintaining human life and cultural food traditions in frontier communities. By sharing culinary equipment and responsibilities, women established the social networks from which communities grew. Women played a major role in local and regional economies by producing and selling butter, eggs, bread and other scarce food items. They earned money by cooking and serving meals and paid for the construction of churches and other community fixtures by organizing fundraising feasts.

"Feeding Community" focuses on the culinary activities of women in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Using biographical accounts, reminiscences, diaries, and letters, the thesis reveals how women's culinary labour was an essential element in building and shaping new communities on the Great Plains.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been influenced by several people whom I would like to acknowledge. In my academic life at the University of Alberta, I am grateful for having Dr. Susan Smith as a teacher, employer, and thesis supervisor. From her I learned the craft of historians. Her gentle yet razor sharp teaching style penetrated and reshaped my understanding of women's place in American society. And she is the finest editor I have worked with in more than twelve years of writing professionally. I was also fortunate in having the late Dr. John Foster as a teacher. His enthusiasm for a good story brought his subject to life in the classroom and his thematic approach to history continues to affect my work. Thanks also to Linda Bridges for her kind heart and warm hugs. They were much needed and will never be forgotten.

My interest in food and farm women's culinary labour began in my childhood when I watched my grandmother, Ida Guthrie, make jelly, pickled beets, and stewed tomatoes from the bountiful harvest of her garden. Her fried chicken continues to serve as a standard of excellence in my own kitchen. Her generosity with both food and culinary advice has sustained me physically, nurtured my spirit, and saved many a dinner from disaster.

My mother-in-law, Margaret Smithyes was instrumental in helping me pass the departmental language examination. As

well, she and my father-in-law John, have been extremely generous in providing food, shelter, and -- by hiring me to work on their apple and raspberry operations -- the opportunity to put my observations about farm women's culinary labour into practice. Their support has been invaluable to the successful completion of this project. My friends Anita Craun, Della Jacobson, and Susan Casel have shared with me their wisdom and insight and have lifted my spirits during the difficult transitions of the past three years.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to the three gentlemen with whom I share my time. My son, Iain, arrived during the second revision -- just in time to make manifest for me the profound biological connection between women and human sustenance. My steadfast companion, Rande the Retriever has provided continuity to my world for more than a decade. This gentle creature has taught me much about patience, friendship, and commitment -- and was responsible for my finding the single greatest treasure in my life: my husband, Mark Innes Smithyes. There is little doubt in my mind that, without such a loving and supportive partner, this thesis would not exist. His genuine interest in my subject matter and his belief in my writing -- even when I have doubted -- enabled me to finish this project and will inspire all my future endeavours.

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# INTRODUCTION:

## WOMEN, FOOD, AND THE FARMING FRONTIER

On September 1, 1861, Elisha Mardin, a farmer on the Kansas frontier, wrote a letter proposing marriage to Elizabeth Frank, a young woman he had known for several years in his former Illinois home. Elizabeth accepted Elisha's proposal by return mail on September 23. Although her response revealed surprise and excitement at Elisha's proposal, Elizabeth was forced to cut her letter short because, as she explained to Elisha, she was in the middle of canning peaches.[1]

Elizabeth's letter could be viewed as a harbinger of her future days because as a woman on the American farming frontier substantial amounts of her attention, time, and energy would be spent performing culinary labour.[2] In fact, the average woman living on the nineteenth-century farming frontier made some of her most significant contributions to her family, her society, and the development of her community through producing and preparing

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1 Elizabeth Mardin, "A Window on Flint Hills Folklife, Part I: The Diary of Elizabeth Mardin," ed., James F. Hoy, Kansas History, Vol. 14, No. 3, (Autumn, 1991): 186-205.

2 Webster's Dictionary defines the word "culinary" as: "of or relating to cookery or a kitchen." In this thesis, the term "culinary labour" refers to all the work involved in producing, procuring, and preserving foodstuffs, and also to the efforts required for preparing and serving meals. See Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984).

food. In addition to a cake recipe and several grocery lists, the log Elizabeth kept between May and December 1862, after she joined her new husband in Kansas, included 53 direct references and numerous indirect references to the food-related work she performed each day.[3] Like most women on the farming frontier, Elizabeth kept a vegetable garden and gathered wild berries, plums, grapes, and peaches which she canned for future use. Most frontier farm women were responsible for dairy operations which required them to milk twice a day, produce butter and cheese for their families, and to sell their surplus to local markets. Baking bread, pies, and cakes demanded at least one full day each week. Women also collected or purchased eggs, assisted their husbands with butchering, processed meat into roasts, hams, sausages and other products, helped in the fields, and looked after livestock. Most farm families' winter food supply depended on women's preservation efforts which required knowledge of a broad range of techniques for storing, drying, pickling and canning meats, fruits, and

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3 Elizabeth Mardin, "A Window on Flint Hills Folklife." Direct references specifically identify food-related activity as in "I baked in the forenoon," and "I baked pies and cakes and bread." Several entries make indirect references to Elizabeth's culinary labour, noting only the presence of guests for dinner or supper. Three such indirect references mention that "mowers were here for dinner."

vegetables.[4] In addition, women cooked between three and five meals a day for their families and farm hands. This workload naturally increased during harvest time when farm wives joined forces to feed upwards of twenty men five meals a day.[5] And when other settlers or local officials were present for dinner, women were called upon not only to prepare a meal, but to create something satisfying and impressive, and sometimes from very little food. The volume of this workload seems staggering by today's standards, yet most women on the nineteenth-century farming frontier had little choice but to do it. As with all American agricultural frontiers, establishing and

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4 Janet Bruce offers an extensive description of food preservation processes used during the mid-nineteenth century in "Of Sugar and Salt and Things in the Cellar and Sun: Food Preservation in Jackson County in the 1850s," Missouri Historical Review Vol. 75, No. 4.: (1981) 417-447. For other descriptions of frontier farm women's culinary labour, see Sandra Myres, Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915 (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 147-149; Paula Nelson, After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917, (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 56-59; Glenda Riley, The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 57-58, 89; Glenda Riley, "Women's Responses to the Challenges of Plains Living," Great Plains Quarterly Vol. 9. (Summer, 1989): 179-180; and Glenda Riley, "In or Out of the Historical Kitchen? Interpretations of Minnesota Rural Women," Minnesota History Vol. 52. (Summer 1990): 61-71.

5 Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier, "Agricultural Mechanization and American Farm Women's Economic Roles," in Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures, edited by Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 215-217.

maintaining a food supply was an absolute priority. Family survival and farm success depended on the combined efforts of women and men.[6] However, according to traditional gendered divisions of labour, women were far more involved in food processing and production than were men.[7] Additionally, producing and cooking food consumed more of these women's time than did cleaning, child care, laundry, or any other responsibility.[8]

These duties were enormous for women who lived on established farms in developed areas. But for those who migrated to the harsh, unfamiliar terrain of the Great Plains, providing nourishment to their families was infinitely more difficult. Before homes were built, women prepared meals from the back of covered wagons or in tents, and cooked over campfires. They created one-pot meals because they often were required to leave behind dishes, cooking utensils and cookstoves. They resurrected the cooking techniques of their mothers and grandmothers and baked bread in Dutch ovens on fireplace hearths. In areas devoid of trees or brush, women used dried animal manure,

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6 For a thorough discussion of the interdependence of men and women on family farms, see John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," American Quarterly, Vol. 33, (Winter 1981): 540. See also John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 50-53.

7 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 50-53.

8 Ibid. See also, Riley, The Female Frontier, 57, 89, and Myres, Westering Women, 147-149.

corn cobs, and twisted hay for fuel.[9] Before crops were ready, during periods of scarcity, or when men were unavailable to help, many women recalled that they fed their families by trapping, gathering, gleaning, substituting, and bartering for foodstuffs.

Women's culinary labour certainly was crucial to sustaining settlers physically, but this work also helped people from different backgrounds preserve their cultural identities on the frontier.[10] They maintained cultural food rules by using acceptable food sources while avoiding items that their societies deemed taboo. Women also transported pieces of settlers' heritage to the farming frontier by preparing familiar foods. Using ingredients which were available to all, women of different geographic

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9 Allan Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire," in The Oxford History of the American West, edited by Clyde Milner, Carrol O'Connor, Martha Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 297.

10 American settlers were joined on the Great Plains by immigrants from such countries as Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain, Hungary, Russia, Germany, and Canada. The region was also populated by groups of freed slaves as well as by many diverse Indian groups. For descriptions of the ethnic makeup of Great Plains agricultural communities see Bogue,"An Agricultural Empire," 283-288, and Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 184-198. For discussions of black American migration to the Great Plains following the Civil War, see Daniel Johnson and Rex Campbell, Black Migration in America: A Social Demographic History (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981), 47-65; and Robert G. Athearn, In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas 1879-80 (Lawrence, Kansas: Regents, 1978), 65-76, 81-82, and 159-161.

and ethnic backgrounds prepared vastly different foods. For instance, from the same three ingredients, flour, fat, and water, Norwegian women made flatbread while American southerners baked biscuits and Germans stewed dumplings.

Farm women's culinary labour also enhanced life on the frontier beyond the scope of their own households and helped create communities. Women's roles as creators of feasts, grinders of coffee, and bakers of bread brought them together with other women and their families. Rural social networks often grew from neighbors sharing foodstuffs and culinary equipment and gathering together for Sunday dinners. Communities developed and reaffirmed themselves through social gatherings like school picnics, church socials, harvest feasts, and Fourth of July celebrations where the fried chicken, hams, pies, cakes, and other goodies women prepared and served were the most celebrated features.[11]

By marketing the fruits of their culinary labour and using their experience in the kitchen to find work off the farm, women also played a vital role in the economic life of their communities. Farm wives and daughters sold and

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11 For general descriptions of food-related social activities on the frontier, see Cathy Luchetti, Home on the Range: A Culinary History of the American West (New York: Villard, 1993), 116, 165; Kenny L. Brown, "Building a Life: Culture, Society, and Leisure in the Cherokee Outlet," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 71, No. 2 (1993): 174-201; and Myres, Westering Women, 175-180.

bartered milk, cream, butter, eggs, and chickens. They supplied other settlers and area shops with produce from their gardens and with wild fruits and berries. They baked and sold bread, pies, and cakes, and cooked meals for local bachelors as well as for the numerous transients venturing across the plains. Many used their culinary experience and talents to establish restaurants. Others worked as cooks in hotels, cafes, and dining halls. The money women earned through culinary labour was not simply a supplement to the income generated by large scale farming. For many farm families, women's culinary labour provided their households' only steady cash income.[12]

By cooking and selling food for fund raising events, women contributed to the structural development of their frontier communities. Many frontier church buildings and school houses were built with money earned from pie suppers, box lunches, and bake sales which were organized, stocked and staffed by local women. The buildings which were paid for through such culinary efforts, although constructed and usually ceremoniously dedicated by men, offer physical evidence of women's involvement in the economic and infrastructural development of their towns.

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12 Glenda Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed: Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870," Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 49, (May 1980): 263; See also, Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire," 308, and Gilbert Fite, The Farmers Frontier: 1865-1900 (New York: Holt, 1966), 47.

Clearly, women's culinary labour was crucial for successful homesteading and played a major role in the social and economic development of frontier communities. Yet, the impact of this activity has not been analyzed. Historians generally agree that acquiring and producing food was frontier farm women's predominant concern, but only offer short descriptions of this work usually emphasizing the drudgery of frontier cooking.[13] Likewise, male-oriented accounts of the farming frontier often focus on land ownership and large scale commodity production and have ignored women's significant role as food producers.[14]

Some recent investigations have emphasized women's participation in the social and economic development of

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13 Although she makes such statements as "the preparation and preservation of food...was a constant concern of the plains homemaker," Glenda Riley's The Female Frontier contains only six paragraphs about this work. Likewise, in Frontier Women, Julie Roy Jeffery recognizes culinary labour as "an important domestic duty," but provides only a three paragraph description outlining the difficulties frontier women faced in providing and preparing food for their families. Finally, in Westering Women, Sandra Myres offers only seven paragraphs detailing women's culinary labour.

14 See, for instance, Fite, The Farmers Frontier; Ray Billington, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier, 3rd edition (New York: MacMillan, 1967); Bobby Johnson, "Pilgrims on the Prairie: Rural Life in Oklahoma Territory," in Rural Oklahoma, edited by Donald Green (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977), 6-20; Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire"; and White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own."

frontier communities,[15] but even the most current western history textbooks segregate women's experience and diminish or misunderstand the veracity of their contributions. For example, in his chapter on the farming frontier in The Oxford History of the American West (1994), Allan Bogue notes critics' concerns that agricultural historians have "emphasized the role of the male head of the farm household while ignoring the farm wife." Although he claims such criticism is justified, Bogue maintains that if "settlers failed to make a living, all else failed as well."[16] This argument continues to attach primary importance to the economic value of men's farm production while relegating women's equally crucial efforts to secondary status.

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15 Among these are Julie Roy Jeffery, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 49, (1980): 173-213; Susan Lee Johnson, "'A memory sweet to soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the American West," The Western Historical Quarterly, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, (November, 1993): 495-517; See also, Myres, Westering Women; Glenda Riley, Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Riley, The Female Frontier; and Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., The Women's West (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

16 Bogue's thirty-seven page discussion of the farming frontier virtually ignores the presence of women in developing agricultural communities. Women are appended to the end under "Family Ventures" and their labour is described in three paragraphs. See Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire," 307-308. Richard White's "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own" devoted some space to women, yet segregates women's experience from the other topics rather than integrating it.

Bogue's position fails to recognize that it was virtually impossible for men to "make a living" without the support mechanisms made available through women's labour. However, my findings on women's culinary labour in the busiest homesteading areas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries -- Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas and Oklahoma Territory[17]-- join the work of scholars who contend that although male farmers may have been hailed as the providers of the nation's food supply, in achieving this title they indisputably depended on women's expertise and efforts for success.[18]

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17 Homesteading of this area was legalized by the Homestead Act of 1862 and was heavily advertised and promoted. In a matter of years this region of the Great Plains had been rhetorically transformed from "The Great American Desert" to "A Land of Milk and Honey" through the efforts of land speculators, railroad companies and politicians. Gilbert Fite describes the metamorphosis of the Great Plains in The Farmers Frontier, 9-14. See also Billington, Westward Expansion, 705-708; White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own", 138-145; Deborah Fink, Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 3-4; and Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire," 275-313, esp. 289 and 290.

18 An increasing number of investigations have revealed that women's traditional knowledge and labour were imperative to the success of nineteenth and early twentieth century farm operations. See Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail; Joan Jensen, With These Hands: Women Working on the Land (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981); Nancy Grey Osterud, "'She Helped Me Hay it as Good as a Man': Relations Among Men and Women in an Agricultural Community," in "To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780-1890, edited by Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987) 87-97; Haney and Knowles, Women and Farming; John Mack Faragher, "The Midwestern Farming Family, 1850," in Women's America: Refocusing the Past, 3rd edition, edited by Linda

This thesis examines how women's culinary labour influenced the development of new communities on the farming frontier. Chapter one explains the impact of this work on the most fundamental elements of society -- physical life, social order, and cultural identity. Based on the premise that women's personal experiences and inclinations as well as their cultural training shaped their culinary abilities, the chapter details some of the strategies women used to obtain food when familiar sources were unavailable. It also demonstrates how women maintained cultural values through the foods they avoided and preserved cultural tradition through the foods they prepared. Chapter two demonstrates how women's shared role as producers and preparers of food brought them together to create the social networks that formed new communities. It also reveals how women provided opportunities for people to express and reinforce their roles as members of new communities by organizing, cooking, and serving special meals and community feasts. The final chapter is constructed around economics and the value of women's household labour. Beginning with a discussion of the conflict between America's idealization of domesticity and the nation's refusal to assign economic value to women's household labour, chapter three explains how frontier farm women contributed to family coffers and to the material

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Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Fink, Agrarian Women.

development of their communities by using their culinary skills.

This effort has required a broad examination of scholarship in women's history, agricultural history, western history, anthropology, folklore, and culinary history, all of which revealed a dearth of material on the subject of women's culinary labour. In each one of these fields except women's history, women exist only on the periphery, their presence rarely made known.

Culinary historians have all but omitted women's role in the development and perpetuation of cuisine, cooking, and culinary customs by either ignoring it in favour of men's food-related activities, or by burying it altogether through the use of genderless language. Titles like Food, Man and Society and The American and His Food, and Food and Man announce a male-oriented focus before their covers are even lifted.[19] Although their titles are somewhat more neutral, Food in History, Food and Drink in America: A History, and Eating in America: A History all approach the subject from a masculine perspective.[20] History of Food[21] (1994) notes

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19 Richard Cummings, The American and His Food (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941); Miriam Lowenberg, E. Neige Todhunter, Eva Wilson, Jane Savage, and James Lubawski, Food and Man, 2nd Edition (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974); Dwain Welcher, Food, Man and Society (New York: Plenum Press, 1976).

20 Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont, Eating in America (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1976); Richard Hooker, Food and Drink in America: A History. ( Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981); Reay Tannahill, Food

the primordial linguistic relationship between women and food in the introductory chapter, yet the book's index contains only one reference to women: *women and wine.*[22] Although author Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat recognizes primitive women's roles as gatherers of plant foods, she fails to note archeological evidence revealing that this was often early peoples' only consistent food source and in fact devalues women's food-gathering activity altogether by claiming that this assignment was made because men were "better suited to facing the dangers of hunting."[23] As well, History of Food dismisses as mere controversy the widely accepted belief that women were the first farmers and horticulturalists, even though their "job of gathering

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in History Revised Ed. (New York: Crown, 1989).

21 Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, History of Food, Anthea Bell, trans. (Cambridge Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994).

22 This is a general description of a pre-Christian era Roman law forbidding women to drink wine upon "pain of death." See Samat, History of Food, 266-7.

23 Samat, History of Food. 126; Tannahill, Food in History, 11-12.

plants" would have trained them well for these pursuits.[24]

Most culinary histories make perfunctory references to ways in which the housewife prepared foods and used tools. They often describe the evolution of cookbooks which, historians generally agree, were most often written by and for women. However, I have been unable to find any material which focuses on women's responsibilities as providers, preparers and presenters of food or analyzes the importance of women's roles in transmitting culture by preparing traditional foods, teaching food related rituals to their children, and perpetuating food related customs, feasts, and celebrations.[25]

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24 It is widely acknowledged among archaeologists and historians that women living in the "fertile crescent" of Mesopotamia as early as 10,000 B.C. were the first known agriculturalists in the societies which would become western civilization. The activities and knowledge related to horticulture are considered to have been natural extensions of women's plant-gathering functions, while breeding livestock is considered to have been an outgrowth of men's familiarity with animals through hunting. See Tannahill, Food in History, 17, 32; and Lowenberg, Food and Man, 9-10, 14-17.

25 I have been unable to locate a comprehensive discussion of this subject in a single source, but instead have discovered the following snippets of information (usually only a sentence) by gleaning culinary histories. Although many scholars and the modern farming industry would suggest otherwise, women are widely believed to have been humanity's first agriculturalists and horticulturalists. Women are also believed to have created the first cooking, storage and eating vessels; and to have devised methods for using them to roast, boil and stew food. Songs, poems, stories, advertisements, movies, literature, and popular magazines specifically connect women with food production and preparation, revealing the continuing expectation that a

In recent years, some scholars have denounced women's absence from historical accounts asserting that such treatment has distorted the record of both men's and women's experience. But, the masculinization of culinary history is especially disturbing because culinary labour, particularly when performed in the private household, commonly has been considered women's exclusive responsibility. More significantly, the connection between women and food permeates all levels of human existence and is a fundamental (albeit unrecognized) component of every known human society.[26]

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good wife will cook -- and cook well. An absolute plethora of cookbooks written over the past three centuries by individual women and women's organizations for an explicitly female audience, underscores the assumption that a woman will be the "key kitchen person," in her household -- whether or not she desires the role. Women have been and continue to be primarily responsible for teaching their children food-related rituals and behaviours. Immigrant women have played crucial roles in perpetuating religious and ethnic holidays through recognition and preparation of feasts. They have sustained and comforted and entertained family members, friends and strangers through the edible results of what is often tedious and physically demanding work in the kitchen. See Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 74, 106, 167; Tannahill, Food in History, 10, 11, 17, 96, 322-326; and Lowenberg, Food and Man, 10, 33, 43, 121, 139, 143, 148, 152.

26 Whether it is due to biological determination or social construction, human beings associate women with food at a very fundamental level. Biologically, women's own bodies produce food. The human embryo is nourished through mother's blood from conception to birth and the infant receives food through its mother's breast. Linguists and anthropologists widely accept that human language was developed through this primordial association and have determined that the first spoken word, "mem" or "mam," means *maternal breast, mother, survival,* and *life* in every society around the world and throughout human history. The

My research has unearthed abundant evidence supporting the theory that humans place tremendous importance on women's role as the primary culinary labourers in the private household. Yet, studies by anthropologists and folklorists who examine the symbolic meanings humans attach to food and food related behaviour, rituals, and feasts contain only undeveloped allusions or inferential remarks about the role of women. For example, Mary Douglas, one of the foremost anthropological scholars investigating food and human society, wrote a now classic article entitled, "Deciphering a Meal." Douglas writes, "if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the *pattern of social relations* being expressed" [my italics]. In addition to explaining some of the social meanings of food, Douglas analyses a typical meal in her own household to explain the significance of what foods are prepared and the order in which they are served. It is clear that *she herself* prepared and served the meals, but remarkably,

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mythologies of ancient cultures reveal the deification of the natural extension of women's bodily ability to provide food for infant offspring to their social role as producers and preparers of food. See Peter Farb, Word Play, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 317; Barbara G. Walker, "Ma" in The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 560-1 and Walker, "Demeter," in The Woman's Encyclopedia, 218-219; Helene P. Foley, ed., The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary and Interpretive Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 100-102, 133, 138; Toussaint-Samat, History of Food, 3, 64, 128; and Oskar Seyffert, "Demeter," in "The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art (New York: Grammercy, 1995), 177-8.

Douglas makes no mention of the meaning of this obvious and imperative role. In works like "Deciphering a Meal," the woman's role in constructing and serving the meal is simply assumed and is not considered in the analysis of the social relations being observed through food related behaviour.[27]

The social and economic significance of women's culinary labour has escaped the attention of many women's historians as well.[28] Early efforts to document American women's historical experience tended to conform to "great woman" methodology[29] by concentrating on women's activities

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27 Lowenberg, Food and Man, 121, 148, and 152; Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 249-275. For other examples of this type of inferential treatment, see Linda Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," Journal of the Folklore Institute, Vol. XVI, No. 3, (September-December 1979): 201; Mary Douglas, "The Standard Social Uses of Food," Introduction, Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities, edited by Mary Douglas (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 2-39; and Tony Larry Whitehead, "Sociocultural Dynamics and Food Habits in a Southern Community," in Food and the Social Order, 97-142.

28 Joan Jensen provided an economic analysis of women's butter making activities on the mid-Atlantic frontier focusing predominantly on the production of butter as a market commodity. See, Loosening the Bonds and Joan Jensen, "Butter Making and Economic Development in Mid-Atlantic America from 1750 to 1850," in Women and Power in American History, Vol. 1 to 1880, edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), 106-118.

29 I was introduced to this concept by the late Professor John Foster, an inspiring teacher who made a profound impact on my training as an historian. Gerda Lerner discusses the stages of women's history in her essay, "Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges" in The Majority Finds Its Past (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 145-159. See also, Susan Strasser, Never

deemed successful by patriarchal standards in male-defined and male-directed institutions such as government, industry, and the church.[30] Celebrating such public manifestations of women's power has legitimized some aspects of female experience in America. Ironically, in the finest patriarchal tradition, it has also served to "distance [women's history] from the feminine"[31] by either ignoring, diminishing, or idealistically distorting[32] the means

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Done: A History of American Housework (New York: Pantheon, 1982), Preface.

30 This is not to suggest in any way that these approaches to women's history are questionable but only serves to illuminate how efforts to validate women's experience according to the standards of patriarchy can actually diminish the significance of activities designated as "feminine" during virtually all historical eras.

31 Linda Kerber has noted that it is through the process of distance and disassociation from the feminine that patriarchal authority has historically validated itself. Pertinent to the study of household labour, there exists among some feminist scholars the same tendency to disregard or dismiss this work. See Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History Vol. 75, No. 1, (June 1988): 9-39.

32 A compelling example of the idealistic distortion of women's experience is the exhaustive amount of attention which has been paid to nineteenth-century domestic ideology and the metaphorical constructs of "separate spheres." These topics have inspired countless investigations and debates over women's roles in industrializing America yet are now being understood to have had limited impact on the lives of women who lived outside the Eastern, urban middle-class. Some scholars suggest that historians' unquestioning acceptance of "separate spheres" approaches to women's history may have actually obscured the complex realities of nineteenth-century women's lives. See Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds"; and Boydston, Home and Work, Introduction.

through which the vast majority of women have functioned in society: as operators, managers and labourers of private households.

Much of the scholarship on household labour emphasizes the impact of industrialization on the household rather than the importance of household labour to capitalistic industry, government, and society as a whole.[33] Dismissed by scholars as the study of "pots and pans" for most of the twentieth century,[34] research on the private household has only been hesitantly recognized as appropriate for academic inquiry in the last two decades. Ann Oakley's groundbreaking 1974 British study, The Sociology of Housework, was derided as insignificant by most of her faculty -- including her adviser.[35] About the same time, a handful of American scholars began investigating social and economic aspects of women's household labour. Many used Marxist economic theory to confront such issues as the fact

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33 Ann Oakley cites the tendency of scholars who investigate the private household to do so from a contextual framework of male labour which looks inward toward the housewife's labour. Oakley maintains that a more accurate study of housework requires that the accepted order of concepts and values be reversed. John Mack Faragher also suggests approaching "history from the inside out" in his essay citing the need for a framework through which to study rural women's domestic labour. See Ann Oakley, "Reflections on the Study of Household Labour," Preface, Women and Household Labour, Sarah Fenstermaker Berk, ed., (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 7-14; and Faragher, "History From the Inside Out."

34 Faragher, "History From the Inside Out," 538.

35 Berk, Women and Household Labour, 15-27.

that women's unpaid labour has historically provided an important support mechanism for capitalistic industry. Others have studied societal distinctions between paid labour and unpaid labour using Marxist theory as a basis to assign economic value to the work that women perform in their private households.[36] At the end of the decade, Oakley wrote of her concern about "too much emphasis [being placed] on the theoretical role of housework in the Marxist schema . . . and too little in the way of empirical work."[37] These criticisms continued to apply to scholarly investigations of the housewife and her role in society until the early eighties when a few more sociologists and historians began studying the household.

By the end of the 1970s, the personal diaries, letters, household inventories and oral testimonies upon which much of women's history relies were viewed as acceptable evidentiary materials. Using such sources, women's historians began to investigate the nature of women's

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36 Margaret Benston's 1969 article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," examined women's exclusive responsibility for performing the unpaid labour of the household and revealed how this work provided direct support to capitalistic industry. See Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," Monthly Review, (September 1969): 13-27. See also Wally Secombe, "The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism," New Left Review, Vol. 83 (January-February, 1974): 3-24; and Jean Gardiner, "Women's Domestic Labour," New Left Review, Vol. 89 (January-February, 1975): 47-58.

37 Oakley, "Reflections on the Study of Household Labor," 12.

household labour in specific periods and regions, as well as the technological evolution of housework in America. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's Goodwives, Joan Jensen's Loosening the Bonds, and Jeanne Boydston's Home and Work, offer a substantial amount of insight into the nature of women's traditional work in the colonial and antebellum periods. Susan Strasser's Never Done provides a general history of housework in America from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, revealing how industry has usurped women's roles as producers by commoditizing many of the goods and services consumed by the family. More Work for Mother by Ruth Schwartz Cowan traces the evolution of household technology, illustrating how social changes -- particularly those related to the structure, expectations and operation of the private household -- have only revised the nature of women's household work rather than reducing it. As American history's premier monographs on women's household labour, these works offer fine methodological examples for approaching subject matter which is at once the essence of intimate family history, yet crucial to understanding the workings of local economies. Each of these studies recognizes the centrality of women's culinary labour to the physical survival and economic welfare of their families, offering some detail and selected examples of the types of food related work women have historically performed. However, because their main concerns lie elsewhere, the

history of the relationship among women, food, and society remains unexamined.[38]

The paucity of information about women's elemental relationship with food and their role as humanity's predominant culinary labourers combined with my interest in frontier women's history, inspired the question I address in this thesis: What impact did women's role as the primary producers, preparers, preservers, and presenters of food have on the development of communities on the Great Plains farming frontier? To find an answer, I used the subject of women's culinary labour as a mechanism through which to analyze historical data. Primary sources include biographical and autobiographical essays, oral reminiscences, contemporary letters, and diary entries, many of which have been published in journals or in manuscript collections. My sources depict women from many ethnic backgrounds, but lean more heavily toward the experiences of white American women than any other group. Among the settlers whose experiences I analyzed are women from Denmark, Norway, Germany, and Canada. Additionally, although I surveyed accounts of both women and men who pioneered on the Great Plains farming frontier, my evidence has been provided predominantly by women. This imbalance

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38 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Ulrich, Goodwives; Jensen, Loosening the Bonds; Boydston, Home and Work; Strasser, Never Done.

exists because many more women discussed food and the work related to producing and preparing food in their descriptions of frontier life than did men. Therein lies the fundamental premise of this investigation.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE BASIC INGREDIENTS: WOMEN'S CULINARY LABOUR AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

It was high noon on September 16, 1893. A gunshot blasted through hot, dry, anticipation-filled air, hurling more than one hundred thousand fervent homeseekers across the borders of Oklahoma Territory's Cherokee Outlet. They raced on horseback, on bicycles, and on foot. They leaped from railroad cars, drove covered wagons, buggies and motorcars. Each was competing for a piece of America's rapidly vanishing frontier: a homestead of their own in "The Land of the Fair God."[1] Because it was so well publicized, the Cherokee Outlet Land Run attracted more than twice as many homeseekers as there were available homesteads.[2] Many failed in their quest for farm land. Some were trampled at the starting line. Others lost

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1 Journalist Milton W. Reynolds created the term "Land of the Fair God," after the first run for Oklahoma Territory land in 1889. This term, like other euphemisms used by local and regional boosters, often did not acurately describe the areas, but were intended to encourage settlement. See Donald E. Green, "Beginnings of Wheat Culture in Oklahoma," in Rural Oklahoma, Volume 5, The Oklahoma Series, edited by Donald Green (Oklahoma City: The Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977), 56-73.

2 In his description of single mother Kate May's race for a homestead in the Cherokee Outlet, Henry Kilian Goetz cites the widely held statistic that more than 100,000 people registered to compete for 35,613 pieces of property. See Henry Kilian Goetz, "Kate's Quarter Section: A Woman in the Cherokee Strip," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 61, No. 3, (1983): 250.

horses, oxen, dogs, parents, brothers, children, and their own lives to the stampeding crowds. Many were shot in arguments over rights to land claims. Clearly, the people who participated in this famous race considered owning land important enough to risk everything -- home, family, livestock, and in many cases, life itself.[3]

On the morning of September 17th, Ida Ridenour and a woman friend waited for their husbands and brothers to return from the race. They decided to drive to the starting line to survey the scene, but before they began their trip, they loaded a wagon with "a keg and a barrel of water and a wash boiler full of bread and plenty of butter."[4] Once arrived at the Kansas - Oklahoma Territory border, the women handed out bread they had baked and butter they had churned to the "many disappointed men who were walking back to the state line, leading their horses which were too near dead to

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3 There are numerous books and articles about the series of lotteries and races for homestead lands in Oklahoma Territory and detailing the experiences of those who participated in them. See, for example, John Morris, Charles Goins, and Edwin McReynolds, Historical Atlas of Oklahoma, 2nd Edition (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); Odie Faulk, Oklahoma: Land of the Fair God (Northridge, California: Windsor Publications, 1986); Goetz, "Kate's Quarter Section," and Brad Agnew, "Voices From the Land Run of 1889," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 66, No. 1, (1988): 4-21.

4 Ida Ridenour to Edna Hatfield, June 1933, Ridenour Letters, Edna Hatfield Collection, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Western History Collection. [Hereafter cited as UOWHC].

carry their riders."[5] Along with her memory of how "many a man smiled when [they] gave him a drink of water and a slice of bread and butter,"[6] Ridenour recalled seeing the bodies of dead horses scattered across the prairie.

Two dominant images emerge from Ridenour's recollection of the Cherokee Outlet Land Run: men's willingness to make great sacrifices for land and women's capacity to offer comfort and nourishment with food. These were profound realities which defined the farming frontier.[7] Although most depictions of frontier food production focus on male activities such as hunting, fishing, and the planting, cultivation, and sale of crops, it was women's culinary training, passed down from mother to daughter for generations, their creativity, and their willingness to

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5 Ibid.

6 Ida Ridenour to Edna Hatfield, June 1933, UOWHC.

7 While the subject of men's relationship to and activities on the land have been widely investigated, the significance of women's role as the predominant culinary labourers on the farming frontier has not. Existing studies which include short descriptions of women's culinary labour but little or no analysis include: Glenda Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed: Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870," Pacific Historical Review Vol. 49. (May, 1980): 242-247; Sandra Myres, Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915 (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1982): 147-149; Paula Nelson, After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986); 56-59; Glenda Riley, The Female Fronter: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1988): 57-57, 89; and Glenda Riley, "Women's Responses to the Challenges of Plains Living," Great Plains Quarterly Vol. 9. (Summer, 1989): 179-180.

cooperate with others which often kept families from starvation before a reliable food supply was secured.[8] Women conserved ethnic, religious and geographic food traditions -- the most tenacious aspects of cultural identity[9] -- and helped people make sense of their lives in the frontier's particularly chaotic environment by continuing their role as producers, preparers and servers of food.[10] Even when there was very little food available,

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8 Although I have not yet discovered a source which comprehensively addresses the social impact of mother-daughter transmission of culinary knowledge, there are several sources which make brief mention of this practice. See for example, Miriam E. Lowenberg, E. Neige Todhunter, Eva D. Wilson, Jane R. Savage, and James L. Lubawski, Food and Man, 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 121; Wavery Root and Richard de Rochemont, Eating in America: A History (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1976), 74; John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); 122-126; and Glenda Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed."

9 Anthropologists recognize food and the habits and rituals a society attaches to it have symbolic meaning far beyond its biological or historical context. See Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966); Lowenberg, Food and Man, 119-22; and Mary Douglas, "The Standard Social Uses of Food" in Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities, edited by Mary Douglas (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 1-39.

10 This is underscored by the diverse range of foods now available in North America which have been introduced by immigrants. See The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 5, (New York: MacMillan, 1968): 508-510; Lowenberg, et. al., Food and Man, 117, 159; and, Mary Douglas, "Standard Social Uses of Food." Numerous scholars have noted the importance of women's role as transporters and conservers of culture upon moving to a new environment. Some of these include: Julie Roy Jeffery, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Sandra Myres, Westering Women; Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on

women maintained social order by avoiding foods which were deemed "taboo" such as horses, dogs, and skunks.[11] And when ingredients permitted, they provided a tactile and emotional link to the lives settlers had left behind by preparing the foods their families had enjoyed in their pre-frontier homes.

This chapter explains how women's culinary labour was essential to the physical and cultural foundations of frontier farming communities. Based on the premise that women's personal experience, cultural background and settlement circumstances affected their culinary abilities, the first section details some of the strategies women used to provide food for their families. The chapter then examines two principal ways that women maintained cultural food traditions: through avoidance of unacceptable items and by cooking familiar foods.

Women's abilities to acquire food and the ways they performed their culinary responsibilities were shaped by

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the Lower East Side, 1890-1925. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985); and Glenda Riley, "Women's Responses."

11 Anthropological observation indicates that certain foods become taboo within societies for various reasons. One of these is that a particular animal is viewed as a "totem," which symbolizes venerated ideas or beliefs or because a particular animal represents negative ideas or evil. For more on food taboos, see Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and Margaret Visser, The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners (Toronto: HarperCollins, Ltd., 1992), 1-38, 298-337. See also Lowenberg, et. al., Food and Man, 119-22.

subjective aspects of their lives[12] as well as the circumstances that defined their settlement periods.[13] In addition, women's knowledge and experience were as important as culture and environment for successful food production and preparation on the frontier. Although some women brought flour, bacon, coffee and other supplies with them to their claims, many arrived without the proper training or equipment required to feed a family in a subsistence environment.[14] Young women who married and immediately

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12 For example, although the women of peasant and yeoman families who immigrated to America from Russia, Germany, Denmark, and other European countries found themselves in a new land with a different language, traditions and systems of government from those of their homes, they were far better suited to the rigors of frontier farm life than were many native born, middle-class American women. The significance of ethnic and cultural diversity on the farming frontier is being increasingly recognized by historians. See, for instance, Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own" (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 189-98 and Kathleen Neils Conzen, "A Saga of Families," in The Oxford History of the American West edited by Clyde Milner, Carrol O'Connor, and Martha Sandweiss (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 315-57.

13 Regardless of their level of farming experience, all homesteaders' access to food was affected by conditions over which they had little control such as soil quality, water supplies, drought, prairie fires, hail storms, early blizzards, grasshopper plagues, lack of transportation, the effects of the Civil War, and continuing hostilities between the American government and various Indian peoples. Glenda Riley delineates three main categories of challenges which faced frontier women on the Great Plains: native inhabitants, physical environment, and political conflicts. See "Women's Responses", 175-177.

14 It is true that some women who ventured onto nineteenth-century homesteads were neither trained or experienced in the complicated and extensive duties of farming. However, because American society was predominantly rural well into the twentieth century, most

left their families for frontier homesteads often relied on older women living nearby to teach them the culinary skills their new jobs required.[15] More than culinary knowledge and experience, women's attitudes about frontier life, their willingness to learn about new foods and improvise when cooking made the difference between eating well and going hungry for most families.[16] Mollie Dorsey Sanford was a

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American women would have been well trained and skilled at the tasks required of farm women. On farm women's culinary labour in various American frontier periods and regions, see Joan Jensen, Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Goodwives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); and, Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

15 One such woman was Isabella Diehl, a young bride from Scotland who arrived at her South Dakota homestead knowing very little about the culinary tasks for which she was responsible. Diehl turned to a neighbour woman who taught her to bake bread, "make corn bread and pancakes and many of the vegetables that were strange to her." Isabella Diehl, Biography, Daughters of Dakota: A Collection of Pioneer Women's Biographies and Autobiographies Compiled by the Federated Women's Clubs of South Dakota, ( Pierre, South Dakota: South Dakota Historical Society, 1966), 108-109. [Hereafter cited as Daughters of Dakota]. See also, Riley, "Women's Responses," 181.

16 Allan Bogue addresses the impact of "the personal inclinations of the women" upon the success of family farm endeavours in "An Agricultural Empire," 308. On the importance of women's experience and attitude for successful homestead farming, see Myres, Westering Women, 141-66; Seena B. Kohl, "Image and Behavior: Women's Participation in North American Family Agricultural Enterprises," in Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures, edited by Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 89-108; 58-95; Riley, The Female Frontier, 41-101; and Deborah Fink, Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

teenager when she put together a meal of fried bread and meat, pie, stewed wild gooseberries, and coffee for four bachelors who showed up unexpectedly for dinner. The young woman accomplished this feat when her family had "about run ashore for provision, . . . having no milk, no butter, eggs, or vegetables."[17] Many pioneers remembered that they, their mothers, and their sisters shared Mollie Sanford's drive and resourcefulness as they scoured the land for nuts, berries, wild fruits and greens, trapped rabbits and birds, bartered with Indians, and relied on relationships with other women to feed their families.

Foraging was one of the predominant strategies frontier farm women used to provide food for their families until gardens, fruit trees, and field crops could provide reliable sources. Nebraskan Charley O'Kieffe recalled that "weeds" contributed much to his family's diet, which was directed by the slogan, "If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em." O'Kieffe's mother cooked pigweed, lambsquarters, and purslane with "a small hunk of salt pork in the pot."[18] Until her garden vegetables were ready to harvest, Oklahoma homesteader Edna Ahrens gathered "wild onions, sour dock and lamb's quarters

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17 Mollie Sanford, Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1976), 37-38.

18 Charley O'Kieffe, Western Story: The Recollections of Charley O'Kieffe, 1884-1898, (Lincoln, 1960), Quoted in Roger Welsch, "Sorry Chuck" -- Pioneer Foodways," Nebraska History, Vol 53, No. 1, (Spring, 1972): 107.

or wild greens." A South Dakota pioneer recalled how a neighbor woman created a festive atmosphere during the drought of 1910 by making a pudding from wheat ground in her coffee mill, and serving it with fresh cream and "Russian thistles that had sprouted after a shower."[19]

When women were unfamiliar with local plants, the critical need to find food often sparked creativity, as it did for Mary Suftin. During the tough first years on their South Dakota homestead, Suftin's husband went to work in a nearby mine to earn money. Mary remained at home, struggling to feed her five children, a cow, and a horse. Drought had withered everything around and dried up the nearby creek which had been their only source of water. Yet, the grasses and weeds along the edge of the creek had remained green and the horse and cow managed to feed and survive. As her food resources diminished, Mary grew increasingly desperate. Then, one day she decided to follow the cow along the creek to see what it ate, "knowing that if it was safe for the cow it would be safe for the family, and after that the family had a real treat of fresh greens every day."[20]

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19 Book and Thimble Club, Proving Up: Jones County History, (Murdo, South Dakota, 1969): 144, 432. Quoted in Paula Nelson, After the West Was Won, 129.

20 Mary Campbell Sutfin, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 357-358.

Settlers also depended on women's foraging and their knowledge of wild greens, fruits and berries to supplement their farm produce. Mrs. T.A. Arnold was one of many women who recalled making jelly and other preserves from wild plums and grapes that they had collected from the nearby river banks.[21] Roy Sage remembered that the first winter his family lived on their Nebraska homestead, he and his siblings raided pack-rat nests for wild grapes, plums and choke cherries. Sage's mother then dried the fruit or pressed it into juice, providing much needed nutrients which would have otherwise been unavailable.[22] As well as foraging for wild foods, women gleaned their areas for food which had been left behind by other settlers. Joanna Hickenbottom recalled how she and her sister found five bushels of beans in the middle of the road near their Nebraska claim. Presuming that someone had been unsuccessful at selling them and had dumped them out, Hickenbottom wrote, "we gathered up about two bushels of them and they surely did come in handy."[23]

Like Roy Sage's mother, women understood that supplying enough food for an entire family required not only adult

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21 Mrs. T.A. Arnold, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 3: 138.

22 Roy Sage, "My Boyhood Days in Custer Co.," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska (Broken Bow, Nebraska: Custer County Chief, 1936), 12-13.

23 Joana Hickenbottom. "Two Homesteaders Wed," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 141-143.

efforts, but those of their children as well. Settlers recalled that much of their time as children was devoted to snaring prairie chickens, helping in the fields, watching after unpenned dairy cows, milking, churning, learning to bake, can, and preserve food, helping their mothers prepare meals, and washing dishes. Ethel Riffle, a daughter in a South Dakota homesteading family remembered how her entire family took a picnic dinner on day-long outings to gather fruit. She noted, "Each one had our little pail according to our ages, which we filled with fruit and we would help mother prepare it for canning."[24] In times of crisis, women were often forced to rely on their children to acquire food. After Mary Robinson's father was killed by lightning on their Nebraska homestead, her mother remained on the farm where Mary, along with her brothers and sisters, "caught large numbers of prairie chickens and grouse in corn stalk traps and salted them down in a barrel. [We] thus had plenty of meat to eat the whole year around."[25] Others traded their labour for food. South Dakotan Myrta Jones recalled how she and two of her daughters helped their family survive a meagre winter by "pull[ing] and topp[ing] turnips for a neighbor. . . ." The women received half the turnips for their work and their family ate turnips all winter,

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24 Ethel Riffle, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 311-312.

25 Mary Taylor Robinson, "Father Killed by Lightning -- Mother Carried On," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 24-25.

substituting them for potatoes during a time when their "only meat was mutton, and [they] had no butter and very little milk."[26]

Substitution and improvisation were common culinary strategies. Peter Ebbesen, the son of immigrants who settled on a homestead near the Danish community of Dannebrog, Nebraska, recalled that his mother "generally had a magic gift of making something out of nothing."[27] Like women across the Great Plains, she ground wheat in her coffee grinder to make biscuits and ground corn for porridge and corn bread. Ebbesen's mother also produced sorghum to replace maple syrup.[28] Subsituting sorghum for maple syrup and refined sugar was one of many ways frontier farm women coped with shortages of specific ingredients. Ida Ridenour remarked that "necessity is the mother of invention," as she explained how women in her area used sorghum molasses to make "poor man's apple preserves."[29] Ridenour and her Oklahoma Territory neighbours also made syrup from watermelons by extracting the juice and boiling it down. In

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26 Myrta Crystal Miller Jones, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 205-206.

27 Peter Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairie: Recollections of Peter Ebbesen," edited and translated by William J. Orr, Nebraska History, Vol. 64, No. 1, (Spring, 1983): 113-114.

28 Ibid.

29 Ida Ridenour to Edna Hatfield, Ridenour Letters, Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

Nebraska, Joanna Hickenbottom and her sister boiled down muskmelons to make a thick butter.[30] Pioneer women also substituted crackers for apples in pies, gunpowder for salt, and roasted rye, wheat, and barley for coffee.[31]

Settlers also relied on women's culinary labour for milk, cream, butter and cheese. Most families tried to take at least one cow to their new homesteads in order to provide such items. Mrs. Arthur Wood wrote that during her trip from Illinois to their Nebraska homestead her grandmother "would hang a pail of milk in the wagon while they were travelling, and after they had pitched camp she would take the pail from its place and the milk would be churned to butter from the jar of the wagon over the rough trail."[32] For poor white settlers, newly freed slaves, and immigrant pioneers who had no dairy cattle, acquiring dairy products posed a problem that women solved in numerous ways. One of the more innovative solutions came from using the resources at hand. Bertha Abercrombie, an Oklahoma homesteader, was only one of several women who described how they caught, penned, and milked wild cows from the herds roaming the

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30 Joana Hickenbottom, "Two Homesteaders Wed," 141-143.

31 For more on food substitutions on the frontier see, Cathy Luchetti, Home on the Range: A Culinary History of the American West (New York: Villard, 1993), 113.

32 Mrs. Arthur Wood, "Early Days in Northwest Custer," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 109-111.

prairie.[33] Women also shared their cattle with neighbours and worked cooperatively to produce dairy foods. John Mills remembered how his mother and other women in his Nebraska community met at a common fenced cow yard, "putting their milk in a couple of big tubs and made cheese of good quality as was also the butter they churned."[34]

Women shared other food resources as well. E. E. Austin recalled how a drought in 1890 brought food shortages to Nebraska: "cellars and cupboards were pretty empty and times indeed were hard, but neighbors visited one another and ate each others' bread and gravy (sometimes pretty thin gravy, let me tell you) and relished it."[35] Catherine McGillvary's culinary experience and ingenuity saved [her] family and "neighbor[s] from hunger and suffering"[36] after floods in South Dakota rendered many homeless in 1881. With 18 people to feed and only one teal duck to serve them, Catherine dressed and roasted the duck, made a "goodly supply of gravy," and cut the meat into tiny slivers "in order that each of the eighteen to be fed might get a

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33 Bertha Abercrombie, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 47-49.

34 John C. Mills, "A Boy's Life in '79," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 90-91.

35 E.E. Austin, "A Hard Time Story of 1890," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 129-130.

36 Catherine Brodie McGilvery, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 254-255.

taste."[37] Women also obtained food supplies through extended family networks and planted seeds and tree cuttings from relatives' gardens and orchards on their new homesteads. Kansan Flora Heston's letters home included frequent requests for berry roots, currant, gooseberry and grape slips, and strawberry plants.[38] Women often turned to their families for relief in emergency situations as well. After two years of drought and a hail-storm had ravaged Ida Ridenour's homestead, her family faced the winter of 1895-96 with no money, no meat, no chickens, or grain and "five stomachs to fill." Her mother, who lived in Indiana, sent "150 pounds of genuine buckwheat flour, [and] a sack of dried apples" to help them survive.[39]

Whether or not they had family to help them during food shortages, women's cultural understanding of what could be considered edible shaped their culinary efforts. Sometimes this meant ignoring the food that was around them. Avoidance of foods deemed inappropriate or "taboo" by their own societies often made it hard for women to provide food for their families. Orthodox Jewish women were particularly challenged by the strict dietary laws of their religion.

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37 Ibid.

38 Floora Moorman Heston, "I Think I will Like Kansas: The Letters of Flora Moorman Heston, 1885-1886," Kansas History 6, No. 2, (Summer 1983): 90.

39 Ida Ridenour, Ridenour Letters, Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

Many families survived on bread and eggs in areas where a ritual slaughterer was not available to provide kosher meat.[40] More often, settlers' diets were limited by cultural prescription rather than religious restriction. For instance, because they had been taught that turnips, carrots, and potatoes were foods for cattle and horses, many Americans refused to eat raw vegetables except when faced with scurvy.[41] Americans from the North and East were scornful of Southerners' penchant for boiled pork, cold cornbread, and buttermilk.[42] And even though some women remembered their new homestead lands as places teeming with food where they "cooked wild turkeys, quail, prairie chickens and rabbits . . . every day,"[43] other settlers preferred to live on cornbread for months at time rather than "touch mutton, veal, rabbit, goose, duck, or any other

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40 Riley, The Female Frontier, 39. See also, Robert J. Lazar, "Jewish Communal Life in Fargo, N. Dak.: The Formative Years," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains Vol. 36, No. 4, (Fall, 1969): 349-356; and, Oliver B. Pollack, "The Jewish Peddlers of Omaha," Nebraska History, Vol. 63, No. 4, (Winter, 1982): 474-501.

41 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 113.

42 This is an important regional food distinction which reflects early exploration and colonization patterns in America. The food habits of northern and eastern regions of the U.S. were influenced by the British, German and Dutch while southern foods reflect the cuisine of French and Spanish explorers and colonists. See Jay Gitlin, "Empires of Trade, Hinterlands of Settlement," in Oxford, 79-113.

43 Mrs. T.A. Arnold, Interview.

ill-considered 'varmints.'"[44] Jennie Quillen Porter recalled homesteading in Oklahoma during the 1890s :

> If you went somewhere about meal time and the neighbors did not seem very anxious to ask [you] to stay for a meal, perhaps it was the neighbor would have nothing but cornbread and milk for that meal. It was said that one neighbor had little to eat one winter but mush made from kaffir corn and milk.[45]

Such stories describe the realities for pioneers like Martha Atkinson, who arrived in Oklahoma Territory in February 1894. The first year on her family's claim, Atkinson, her husband and children ate only "cornbread, sorghum molasses, milk and a little butter."[46] Minnie Meier described how, in 1895, during her family's first year on their South Dakota homestead they had "all [they] could do to get enough to eat . . ." and recalled that they finally had to turn to the government for rations of seed wheat, flour, yeast and dry salt pork.[47] Miriam Davis Colt, a New York schoolteacher who moved to Kansas as part of a vegetarian settlement, sadly recalled her family's meals as consisting of "...the same simple dishes, right over and over again: hominy, Johnny cake, Graham pudding, some white bread, now

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44 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 113.

45 Edna Hatfield, Quillin Manuscript, Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

46 Martha Atkinson, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 3: 251-254.

47 Minnie Pietersen Meier, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 259-260.

and then stewed apple, a little rice, and tea occasionally for the old people."[48]

Ironically, many of these hungry homesteaders had settled near Indian communities which lived off of indigenous plants, berries, fish, and wild game in the area.[49] Cherokee women whose families had lived in Oklahoma Territory for nearly thirty years by the time others began settling the land recalled the abundant natural foods of their area: "in the summer there were berries and other wild fruits and we gathered all we could eat any time we wanted them. We dried peaches, pumpkins and other vegetables and we had pears and beans to use during the

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48 Miriam Davis Colt, Went to Kansas (Ann Arbor: University Microforms, 1966), 52.

49 This is not to suggest that all Indian communities enjoyed abundant food resources. Indians' access to food was dependent on the same environmental factors that affected other groups, but political factors had an additional impact on their sources. For instance, because they had been relocated to the plains decades earlier and were considered "cooperative" by the government, certain Indian communities were more familiar with their territories and maintained more political control over their assigned lands than did nomadic groups like the Sioux and the Kiowa who continued to fight the American government for their land and freedom into the 1870s. Due to extermination of the buffalo, internment on reservations, and the environmental disruption caused by American settlement, many Indian communities -- particularly those from non-agrarian traditions -- experienced malnutrition and starvation in great numbers. On the complexities of relations between individual Indian societies and the U.S. government, see White, "It's Your Misfortune", 21-53, 85-118; Elliot West, "American Frontier," in Oxford, 116-149; and, Clyde Milner, "National Initiatives," Oxford, 151-93.

winter months."[50] Like those of the Cherokee Nation, Chickasaw and other Indian women cultivated their own garden produce, which they used in conjunction with wild foods to prepare such traditonal dishes as Sofkey grits, blue dumplings, sour cornbread, bean bread, and a dried corn and meat casserole called pashofa.[51]

For many settlers, avoiding the foods of Indians and others considered social outsiders provided a powerful means of constructing social order. Attacking or avoiding another society's food or food traditions and refusing to eat with another implies hostility and exclusion, thus, nineteenth-century America's negative attitude toward Indian peoples is reflected in homesteaders' avoidance of their foods. This reluctance to adopt Indian foods was a great paradox of the farming frontier because, although culinary scholars have noted a virtual absence of foods acquired from Indians

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50 Sallie Billie Allison, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 2: 215-218.

51 Annie Chamberlain Adams, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 168-175; Lola Maud Johnson Amerson, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 2: 246-251. It is a tragic reflection of modern American Indian culture that the most recent edition of the official cookbook of the Five Civilized Tribes Museum in Muskogee, Oklahoma, does not include a single recipe for these or any other traditional native dishes. Blue dumplings and sofkey grits have been replaced with recipes for such foods as Spamwitches, using such ingredients as Spam, Velveeta processed cheese, catsup and pickle relish. See Pow Wow Chow, A Collection of Recipes from Families of the Five Civilized Tribes: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, 2nd Edition (Muskogee, OK, 1984).

during the late nineteenth century,[52] corn, the predominant food homesteaders clung to as "American," had been adopted from Indian tribes by their colonial ancestors.[53] Frontier farm women ground corn in their coffee grinders to make johnny cake, corn pone, corn muffins, and corn meal mush. They prepared corn soups, stews, and stuffings. They roasted corn on the cob and fed corn to their livestock. By the nineteenth century, more than 150 American words and phrases used the word "corn."[54] This change in white settlers' response to Indian foods depicts the shift in power and social relations between Americans and Indian peoples from initial contact to the nineteenth century. Early colonists depended heavily on Indians for their survival, but by 1876, Jackson's forced relocation policies and decades of horrific wars had convinced many Americans that extermination or assimilation were the only options for dealing with Indian peoples. The government's policy of "kill[ing] the Indian to save the man," included a wide-

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52 In "Sorry Chuck -- Pioneer Foodways," Nebraska History, Vol. 53, No. 1, (Spring, 1972): 99-113. Roger Welsch notes that some homesteaders used a limited number of these foods like pemmican, as "emergency survival foods" but that these were usually abandoned when other foods became available.

53 Margaret Visser, Since Eve Ate Apples, Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos, of an Ordinary Meal, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), 22-54; and Richard J. Hooker, Food and Drink in America: A History (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981), 41-2, 46.

54 Elliott West, "American Frontier," 137.

scale assault on the buffalo, the Plains Indians' most significant food resource; internment on reservations, where Indian communities were often forced to rely upon military rationing of white flour, coffee, sugar and other non-traditional foodstuffs; and sanctioning white reformers who forced Anglo-American foods and customs on Indians and withheld food from those who tried to retain their own traditions. In addition to devastating entire communities, these policies rendered the foods of Indian peoples inedible in the minds of many homesteaders.[55] The result was that women's abilities to provide food for their families were seriously limited during settlement when they were also faced with building homes, digging wells, clearing land, planting fields and gardens, and erecting fences.[56] Some pioneers simply preferred to eat corn for months on end rather than using the foods enjoyed by nearby Indians.

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55 Elliott West describes the shift in power between Indians and whites in "American Frontier," Oxford, 115-149, esp. 140-41. For more on the forced removal of Indian communities, see White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own", 21-53 On the destruction of American Indian foodways see Lowenberg, Food and Man, 71-6; Root and Rochemont, Eating in America, 201-205; and White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own", 212-20.

56 Luchetti notes the social exclusion of American ethnic minorities during the nineteenth century through an absence of their cuisine in cookbooks and on restaurant menus. See Home on the Range, 193. For more on food avoidance, see Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 108; Lowenberg, Food and Man, 117-119, 140, 145-146; Douglas, "The Standard Social Uses of Food,", 1-39; and Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 5: 508-510.

Avoidance of Indian foods was not universal, however. Many women kept their families from starvation by learning about indigenous foods and bartering with Indians.[57] Mary Austin recalled how her family was caught in a snowstorm for four days while travelling to their Oklahoma homestead when they ran out of food. They approached an Indian settlement to barter for corn and ended up receiving not only corn, but some of the venison the Indians had just brought in from a hunt. She recalled that the fried venison steak that she made for supper that night was "the best meat [she] ever tasted in [her] life."[58] Friendships between white pioneers and Indians evolved from women's exchange of information about medical care, farming practices, and natural food supplies, as well as from trading food and other goods. Kansas pioneer Molly Beaver "acquired extensive knowledge of 'palatable and very healthful' greens and roots from accompanying Indian women on their gathering and digging expeditions into nearby woods."[59]

Yet, even when they were willing to trade with Indians for venison, wild turkeys, vegetables, and other foods they

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57 Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller "The Gentle Tamers Revisted: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 49, (1980): 198; Glenda Riley, Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915 (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 159-60, 171, 175.

58 Mary R. Austin, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 3: 356-365.

59 Riley, Women and Indians, 177.

considered edible, many settlers still refused to eat certain foods.[60] One Oklahoma family who ran low on food supplies approached an Indian camp when they saw what they thought was fresh venison drying in the sun. They returned home empty-handed upon learning that "a colt had died the night before and it was this meat that the Indians were drying."[61] These settlers preferred going hungry to breaking their society's taboo against eating horse flesh. However, willingness to break cultural food rules did vary. While some pioneers were sickened at the thought of eating a colt, others reported shooting and eating their own oxen and mules. One woman sadly described how her family was forced to kill and eat their pet dog, although most shuddered at the thought of the Sioux tradition of eating puppy meat.[62]

Once reliable food sources were available, women expressed their own cultural backgrounds through their culinary labour. Women settlers shaped their new societies

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60 Americans continue to avoid eating the flesh of horses and dogs because of the close personal relationships which are associated with these animals. For more on food taboos, see Lowenberg, Food and Man, 119-22; and Visser, Rituals of Dinner, 1-38, 298-337.

61 Edna Hatfield, "The Crews Story," Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

62 This coincides with observations that, under extreme circumstances, humans will temporarily depart from socially constructed ideas of food related propriety and consume foods which are typically considered off limits, including human flesh. See Lowenberg, Food and Man, 119-22; and Visser, Rituals of Dinner, 1-38, 298-337.

by transplanting their culinary training and food traditions to the Great Plains.[63] Folklorist Roger Welsch's suggestion that a lack of ingredients and assimilation pressures forced immigrant pioneers to abandon their food traditions may be accurate during initial landing and settlement when women were often absent or food was scarce. However, when women were present, long-term loss or substantial diminution of immigrant foodways is not supported by anthropological observation, American culinary history, or the accounts of pioneers themselves.[64] Women from Southern states cooked "corn bread and common doin's" as a special dinner for their families and relied heavily on corn, pork, biscuits and buttermilk. These foods were linked to the warm southern climate and thus symbolic of their regional heritage. Alternatively, northern women preferred "white bread and chicken fixens," rare roast beef

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63 On women as transporters of cultural identity, see Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars, 29-38, 93-110, 147-164, 185-206. On transmission of culture through food habits, see Lowenberg, Food and Man, 117, 121-123. On frontier women as conservers of culture through food preparation and customs, see Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 122-126; Jefferey, Frontier Women, 10-12; Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed," 242-247; Riley, The Female Frontier, 98-9; Riley, "Women's Responses," 179-180; and, Glenda Riley, "In or Out of the Historical Kitchen? Interpretations of Minnesota Rural Women," Minnesota History Vol. 52. (Summer 1990): 61-71.

64 Welsch, "Sorry Chuck": See also, Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind, 108-109; Lowenberg, Food and Man, 123; Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 302-310; and Mary Douglas, In the Active Voice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 89.

(which southerners viewed as raw meat), baked "light" bread, and vast quantities of fruit pies.[65] Southern black women cooked meals from hog's entrails, feet, and ears, and also used possum, corn husks, and okra. These ingredients were linked to the lower quality foods they had access to as slaves and also reflected black Americans' African origins.[66] Norwegians, whose food traditions reflected their proximity to the North Sea, pooled their resources each winter to import herring from the Great Lakes to the Dakotas.[67] German and Czech women brought their beer making skills with them to the Dakotas and Nebraska and continued their centuries-old tradition in their private homes when confronted by American prohibitionist law and social opinion.[68]

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65 Richard Power explored these two predominant agricultural subcultures in America and described some of the differences between southern and northern farmers in Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerner and Yankee in the Old Northwest (Indianapolis, Indiana, 1953), cited in Bogue, "Agricultural Empire," Oxford, 305-306. See also Luchetti, Home on the Range, 113.

66 Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 302-310; Luchetti, Home on the Range, 224; Gitlin, "Empires of Trade," 108. On the origins of okra, see Sharon Tyler Herbst, Food Lover's Companion: Comprehensive Definitions of Over 3,000 Wine and Culinary Terms (Hauppauge, New York: Barron's, 1990), 315-316.

67 Barbara Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," Norwegian-American Studies, Vol. 22, (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1965): 178-197.

68 Beermaking was a major cultural tradition for various immigrant groups including Germans and Czechs. Various scholars have suggested that while prohibition was based on women's domestic and social concerns regarding male

With few exceptions, women's cooking techniques, recipes, and food-related rituals had been passed from mother to daughter for generations.[69] Therefore, *how* pioneer farm women cooked as well as *what* they prepared helped settlers maintain fundamental aspects of their cultural identities. Nebraska homesteader Peter Ebbesen recalled the dishes that his mother and other women in his Danish settlement prepared:

> As in Denmark, we had gruel and soup, meat soup, cabbage and kale soup, *ollebrod* [a dish made with bread and non-alcoholic beer] (made from home-brewed beer), and for social occasions *sago* soup, *sodsuppe* [a dish made of sago with fruit syrup, raisins, and prunes], and the incomparable Danish chicken soup with baked biscuits. . . . There were prepared black puddings, *Medisterpolser* [a kind of pork sausage similar to German sausage (Mettwurst)], headcheese, and there was chopped *Plukkemad* [a kind of hash] . . . .[70]

Like the people in Danish communities, Norwegian homesteaders enjoyed traditional foods that women prepared

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drunkenness, it was also used as a cultural weapon by native-born Americans against what they saw as cultural corruption by European immigrants. See Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 373-395, esp. 389; and Hooker, Food and Drink in America, 285-86. On North Dakota German beermaking traditions and responses to prohibition, see Jonathan F. Wagner, "Prohibition and North Dakota's Germans," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains, Vol. 56, No. 3, (Summer, 1989): 31-41. On Czech response to prohibition in Nebraska, see Robert Kutak, The Story of a Bohemian-American Village (New York: Arno Press, 1970): 9.

69 Lowenberg, Food and Man, 121; Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 74.

70 Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairie," [Orr's brackets, Ebbesen's parentheses], 116.

from common ingredients like potatoes, flour, and butter. Norwegian women used potatoes to make *lefse*, a bread made on top of the stove which was served with "butter, sugar, jam, or wrapped around slices of head cheese, rib steak or meat balls."[71] By mixing flour, salt and shortening, Norwegian women made *flatbrød*, a thinly rolled, wafer-like bread considered a delicacy and served with meat and cheese. Rather than the baked cakes and pies which were familiar to Americans, Norwegians enjoyed cookies and fry cakes. Cream was widely used by Norwegian women as a cooking liquid for browning herring and simmering blood dumplings.[72]

In contrast, American settlers used cream primarily to make butter. If cooking with it, they made gravy from the drippings of fried meat. And they certainly would not have considered *flatbrød* a delicacy. The only food item resembling flatbread consumed by American pioneers was a survival food called "hardtack," a flour and water mixture which women rolled out and baked into hard sheets before undertaking their journeys to the frontier.[73] American women served roasted and fried chicken with biscuits while Norwegian women made chicken soup with dumplings. Rather than using potatoes as a major ingredient for bread,

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71 Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat,"189.

72 Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," 189.

73 Jacqueline Williams, Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 14-16.

American women made "splendid good yeast"[74] by combining mashed potatoes with hops[75] to leaven the light bread that people of their culture preferred.

These examples show how the foods women cooked linked the worlds that settlers left behind with the new communities they were creating on the frontier.[76] Thus, the impact of women's culinary labour on frontier communities is reflected in the diverse range of foods described by people across the Great Plains. For Nebraska Czechs, "roast pork, saurkraut and potato dumplings" made a special dinner.[77] North Dakota's Jewish settlers enjoyed pastrami and lox, while German women made cheeses, sausages, pumpernickel bread and pretzels.[78] The foods of former slaves and the southern poor became entrenched in Oklahoma's cuisine where women of most social and ethnic backgrounds cooked biscuits with cream gravy, ham hocks, beans, and cornbread, barbecued meat and pickled okra. Using their personal training and a variety of creative strategies, women overcame limitations imposed by environment and culture to supply their families with food during periods of scarcity. And through performing the endless hours of work

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74 Flora Heston, "I Think I Will Like Kansas," 89.

75 Ibid.

76 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 112.

77 Kutak, The Story of a Bohemian-American Village, 67.

78 Root and de Rochemont, Eating in America, 303, 309.

required to raise gardens, produce dairy products, gather wild fruits, trap small animals, process and preserve meats and vegetables, and cook and serve meals, they maintained a population base which provided the necessary labour to develop and farm the land. As a key factor in preserving cultural traditions and in maintaining human life, women's culinary labour was crucial to establishing the foundations upon which the communities in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma were built.

# CHAPTER TWO

## LEAVENING AGENTS: FAMILIES, FRIENDSHIP AND FEASTS

During the year 1880, a farmer on the Kansas frontier named Elam Bartholomew recorded the names of all the people who called at his home. Because many of these visits extended into dinner or supper, Bartholomew also noted the number of meals his wife prepared and served to their visitors. When he tallied up the numbers at year's end, the farmer was surprised to discover that a total of 1,081 people had called on his family throughout the year. His wife, however, was probably well aware that she had cooked an additional 783 meals for friends, neighbours, and strangers during that year.[1]

While revealing his wife's role as primary cook and server in her household,[2] Bartholomew's record shows how

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1 Gilbert C. Fite, The Farmer's Frontier, 1865-1900 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 219.

2 In addition to producing up to one half of the food consumed in their households, farm women were solely responsible for meal preparation. See John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 50-53; John Mack Faragher, "History From the Inside Out: Writing the History of Women in Rural America," American Quarterly, Vol. 33, (Winter 1981): 540; Sandra Myres, Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915 (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1982), 147-149; Paula Nelson, After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917 (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 56-59; Glenda Riley, The Female Fronter: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 57-59, 89; Glenda Riley, "Women's

her culinary labour was an essential component in the social framework of their community. In addition to economic and agricultural interests, societies on the farming frontier were based on human relationships which were often established and maintained through meals cooked by women like Mrs. Bartholomew.[3] Because there were few restaurants or grocery stores in frontier areas, settlers shared food in their homes as did Kansas homesteaders Elizabeth and Elisha Mardin who frequently dined with neighbours during the course of their individual work days.[4] Another Kansas woman explained that she was always ready for visits from friends and neighbours by keeping "fruit cake or cookies on hand all the time,"[5] making and freezing mince pies, and relying on the meat, chickens, and eggs she produced.[6]

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Responses to the Challenges of Plains Living," Great Plains Quarterly Vol. 9. (Summer, 1989): 179-180; and Glenda Riley, "In or Out of the Historical Kitchen? Interpretations of Minnesota Rural Women," Minnesota History Vol. 52. (Summer 1990): 61-71.

3 Richard White, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 298.

4 Elizabeth and Elisha Mardin, "A Window on Flint Hills Folk Life, Parts I and II: The Dairies of Elizabeth and Elisha Mardin," edited by James F. Hoy, Kansas History, Vol. 14, Nos. 3 & 4, (Autumn, 1991 and Winter, 1991-1992): 186-205 and 246-269.

5 Anne E. Bingham, "Sixteen Years on a Kansas Farm, 1870-1866" in Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1919-1922 Vol. 15, (Topeka, 1923): 521-22, quoted in David Dary, Seeking Pleasure in the Old West (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 152.

6 Ibid.

Women also fed public figures like ministers, schoolteachers, and county surveyors, and even provided meals to strangers who were passing through on their journeys across the plains.[7]

Without public dining facilities, homesteaders gathered for special occasions in one another's homes. They shared Sunday dinners, wedding feasts, and holiday celebrations. They honoured the dead with potluck offerings and attended parties of every kind in the kitchens and yards of their friends and neighbours. And they came together in public places where they catered their own events. Time and again, pioneers stressed the importance of food at events in rural communities where the "only socials were box suppers and candy breakings."[8] Across the Great Plains, people gathered in schoolhouses and churches, at creeks and rivers for harvest feasts, picnics, box lunches, pie suppers, ice cream socials, and candy breakings.[9] These activities

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7 Nelson, After The West Was Won, 63; Dary, Seeking Pleasure in the Old West, 152; Riley, "In or Out of the Historical Kitchen?"

8 Emma Anthony, Interview, Works Progress Administration Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 2: 453-455. University of Oklahoma Western History Collection, Norman Oklahoma. [Works Progress Administration Indian-Pioneer Papers hereafter referred to as Indian-Pioneer Papers]. [University of Oklahoma Western History Collection hereafter cited as UOWHC]. See also Goldie Ridenour Gilbert to Edna Hatfield, April 24, 1957, Ridenour Letters, Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

9 For general descriptions of food-related social activities on the frontier, see Cathy Luchetti, Home on the Range: A Culinary History of the American West (New York:

provided a way for settlers to create new relationships and to reinforce existing ties. And at each of these gatherings, the most significant factor in cementing people's social bonds was the food that women had prepared.[10]

This chapter explains how farm women's culinary labour shaped the social framework of frontier communities. It begins by demonstrating two ways that women's food-related work created the relationships frontier farm communities were built upon: first, it provided a means for women to form and reinforce friendships with other women; and second, it functioned as a necessary component in the composition of frontier families. The chapter then focuses on public feasts such as holiday dinners, box lunches, and church

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Villard, 1993), 116, 165; Kenny L Brown, "Building a Life: Culture, Society, and Leisure in the Cherokee Outlet," Chronicles of Oklahoma Vol. 71, No. 2 (1993): 174-201; and Myres, Westering Women, 175-180.

10 Food is recognized by anthropologists and culinary scholars as the most important aspect of social gatherings. The act of eating together is a powerful symbol which represents common values, social inclusion and functions as a marker of a community's collective identity. See Miriam E. Lowenberg, E. Neige Todhunter, Eva D. Wilson, Jane R. Savage, and James L. Lubawski, Food and Man, 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 145-146; Mary Douglas, "Standard Social Uses of Food," in Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities, edited by Mary Douglas, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), 2-39; Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey, eds., "We Gather Together": Food and Festival in American Life (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc. Research Press, 1988), 8; and Lin Humphrey, "Soup Night: Community Creation Through Foodways,"in We Gather Together, 63 .

suppers to show how the food women prepared was the most important factor for social events where settlers expressed and reinforced their community membership.

As discussed in chapter one, sharing food was an important strategy frontier women used to feed their families. In addition to loaning and borrowing food from one another, pioneer women often shared cookstoves, pots, dishes, and other items with their neighbours.[11] For example, Mattie Brewer had the only coffee grinder in her rural Oklahoma neighbourhood and recalled that all her neighbors came to her house "to grind their coffee and visit."[12] Similarly, Kansas homesteader Carrie Robbins began a lifelong friendship with her neighbour when the two tried to bake bread in an unfamiliar coal stove and ended up burning their "loaves to a solid crisp."[13] Thus, like rural women elsewhere and in other eras, women met and

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11 Space and weight limitations often required women to abandon their household items because they were considered the easiest to leave behind. However, doing so caused women practical hardships and exacted an emotional toll on both women and men. Settlers lamented the loss of beloved china, pots, and other culinary utensils years after they had lost them. See Riley, "Women's Responses", 179; Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 169-171; Myres, Westering Women, 146; and Julie Roy Jeffrey, Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), 38, 54.

12 Mattie Brewer, Manuscript, The Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

13 Carrie Robbins, "Kansas Frontierswomen Viewed Through Their Writings: The Journal of Carrie Robbins," edited by Glenda Riley, Kansas History, Vol. 9, No. 3, (Autumn 1986): 138-145.

befriended one another through borrowing culinary tools.[14]

Collective efforts which were essential for canning fruits and vegetables, processing meat, producing butter, and cooking for harvest crews also brought women together.[15] At butchering time, "neighbors often arranged that one would butcher a beef and another a hog and then they divided the meat for the threshing season."[16] Women went to one another's homes to make sausage and help each other salt and pickle and pack the meat in brine.[17] They turned the work of food preservation into all-night social events by holding canning parties in one another's kitchens

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14 Sharing household tools has been recognized as a common practice among rural women of other eras and regions. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has noted that rural colonial women "socialized through necessity," due to the lack of culinary equipment. See "Housewife and Gadder: Themes of Self-sufficiency and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England,"in "To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780-1890, edited by Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21-34. See also Myres, Westering Women: 148-149; and Mary Neth, "Building the Base: Farm Women, the Rural Community and Farm Organizations in the Midwest, 1900-1940," in Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures, edited by Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 339-340.

15 Deborah Fink, Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 6.

16 Barbara Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," Norwegian-American Studies, Vol. 22, (Northfield, Minnesota: Norwegian-American Historical Society, 1965): 178-197.

17 Janet Bruce, "Of Sugar and Salt and Things in the Cellar and Sun: Food Preservation in Jackson County in the 1850s," Missouri Historical Review, Vol. 75, No. 4 [YEAR]: 426-433; Myres, Westering Women, 179.

where everyone went home at the end with a supply of preserves and pickles.[18] In addition to ensuring that enough food was produced and preserved to supply each family through the winter, women also created "the obligation supper or lunch [which] was the reward for labour"[19] at these gatherings. The time women spent collectively producing food and preparing feasts gave them the opportunity to discuss community issues, share personal concerns with other women, exchange gossip, and provide each other with information about cooking, housekeeping, raising children and other subjects which were pertinent to their roles as farm wives and daughters.[20]

During the harvest, men's labour in the fields was fueled by women's efforts in the kitchen where several women worked together to supply the enormous amount of food men consumed at breakfasts, lunches, dinners and suppers.[21] This culinary labour, combined with the ritual of sharing food with one another and their men after the work was

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18 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 116.

19 Linda T. Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," Journal of the Folklore Institute, Vol. XVI, No. 3, (September-December, 1979): 190-201.

20 Susan Arpad, "'Pretty Much to Suit Ourselves': Midwestern Women Naming Experience Through Domestic Arts," Hayes Historical Journal Vol. 4. (Fall, 1984): 15-27; Myres, Westering Women, 178-179; Riley, The Female Frontier, 100; Neth, "Building the Base, 341.

21 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 126; Myres, Westering Women, 179; Neth, "Building the Base," 340.

finished, reinforced the social bonds that defined their communities.[22] As illlustrated by the gendered division of labour during the harvest, successful homesteading relied upon the combination of men's and women's labour and thus marriage was the foundation of society on the farming frontier.

Men were so well aware of their need for women's knowledge and labour that many were willing to marry strangers.[23] Single men sought wives through placing advertisements in local and Eastern newspapers. Land developers and promoters supported their efforts through widespread campaigns to encourage women to migrate.[24] And the American government itself promoted the family farm as

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22 Humphrey and Humphrey, "We Gather Together", 8; Lin Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings", 194, 198; Lin Humphrey, "Soup Night", 63; Lowenberg, Food and Man, 146, 150.

23 The experience of Edna Helm and Martin Ahrens underscores men's dependence upon women's labour for successful homesteading. As a young, single woman Edna planned to compete for a homestead in the 1889 run for Oklahoma Territory land. The day before the run Martin Ahrens approached her and asked if she was alone. Upon her affirmation he explained that he was a widower in need of a housekeeper and asked if she would marry him if he was successful in his bid for a claim. She agreed, Ahrens won a claim and the couple spent the rest of their lives as husband and wife. Edna Ahrens, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 306-310.

24 Fite, The Farmer's Frontier, 39; Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 159; and Glenda Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed: Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870," Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 49, (May, 1980): 238.

the national ideal well into the twentieth century.[25] However, although male homesteaders' need for women's labour was romanticized through such propagandistic methods, it was ultimately met because contemporary law, social mores and economics ensured most women's dependency upon men.[26]

Male dependence on women's labour brought many couples together through social events like the "Big Blow-Out" that the young, single men of Kadoka, South Dakota organized at their local opera hall. The men's desire for women's cooking was reflected in newspaper advertisements publicizing the event which encouraged ladies "to bring baskets."[27] A woman's reputation as a good cook brought her status in the community and provided single women opportunities for marriage.[28] Nebraskan Mollie Dorsey Sanford caught the attention of the man who would become her husband by creating a meal out of bacon fat, gooseberries,

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25 Even though farm women's labour was not recognized in census reports, the U.S. government idealized the husband-wife farming partnership in the Department of Agriculture's Annual Report of 1862 to the exclusion of all other forms of farming. See Joan Jensen, With These Hands: Women Working on the Land (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), 102; and Deborah Fink, Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 3.

26 Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 50-53; and Faragher, "History From the Inside Out."

27 Nelson, After the West Was Won, 117.

28 Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed," 240, 245. See also, Lowenberg, Food and Man, 150, and Glenda Riley, Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 61.

and dry bread.[29] Women also recognized the value of their culinary expertise. Clara Martin, a school teacher and homesteader in Turner county, South Dakota recognized that her neighbour Sam needed a wife when she and her brother went for a visit and discovered "a keg of sour dough with the sour dough running down outside of the keg."[30] According to Martin's daughter, "she must have made up her mind then that he needed a housekeeper for they became engaged soon after."[31]

The interdependence of men and women was ritually recognized and reinforced through social fundraising events known as box lunches and pie suppers. To participate in a box lunch or pie supper, women and teenage girls prepared a picnic meal using whatever food was available, which during hard times and in poor areas was often little more than bread and butter. The women would then store their food in a bucket or box which they decorated with flowers or wrapped in brightly coloured cloth. Once they arrived at the gathering, they secretly placed their box lunch or supper

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29 Mollie Dorsey, The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories 1857-1866 (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1959), 36-37.

30 Clara Martin, Biography, Daughters of Dakota: A Collection of Pioneer Women's Biographies and Autobiographies Compiled by the Federated Women's Clubs of South Dakota (Pierre, South Dakota: The South Dakota Historical Society, 1966), 248-249. [Hereafter cited as Daughters of Dakota].

31 Ibid.

among all the other buckets, boxes, and bundles. When everyone in the community had arrived and the women's food was all assembled, the men would "bid" on the lunch or dinner they wanted -- usually knowing which woman had prepared the meal. The man who paid the most for a particular box-lunch or dinner received the honour of sharing the food with the woman who made it.[32]

Not only did this ritual place cash value on women's efforts to fund community projects, it provided a socially approved means of courtship. Since men knew which package of food was prepared and presented by their sweethearts, wives, or by women they simply wanted to know better, box-suppers and lunches provided a public forum through which to announce intentions or demonstrate status as a couple. When local bachelors in Bess Corey's area began to show an interest in her, the question of "who would be high bidder for Miss Corey's box lunch?"[33] became one of the more compelling issues in her neighborhood. Women's role in producing the food for box lunches and men's role in purchasing their products symbolized their interdependence. By participating in these events, pioneers reinforced and

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32 I am indebted to my grandmother, Virginia Bluejacket Slack, for her colourful and detailed description of pie suppers and box-lunches. For more, see Lin Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," 195.

33 Nelson, After the West Was Won, 66.

idealized the gender roles which formed the basis of frontier farm communities.[34]

In addition to establishing a need for marriage or at least cohabitation, women's culinary labour played an important role in celebrations that provided public recognition of such unions. Weddings on the frontier were marked by feasting when possible, even if sometimes food was so scarce that wedding banquets consisted of nothing more than cornbread and water, a few apples and other meagre refreshments.[35] Offering some type of food to wedding guests was an essential part of the marriage celebration and homesteaders, hungry for society and nourishment, attended weddings, "sometimes more for the food and merriments than to witness the nuptial ceremony."[36] Kansas homesteaders Carrie and Cephas Robbins celebrated their wedding with a "supper consisting of sandwiches, coffee, pickles, cheese, and five kinds of cake."[37] As with most social events, women's culinary efforts were critical to the success of wedding feasts. Mrs. Robert Bagby recalled that her cousin and another cousin's wife "cooked and baked for three days"

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34 Theodore Humphrey, "It's a Community Deal Here, You Know: Festive Community Life in Rural Oklahoma," in We Gather Together, 161. See also Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, 159.

35 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 116.

36 Dary, Seeking Pleasure in the Old West, 162.

37 Carrie Robbins, "Kansas Frontierswomen," 138-145.

preparing the dinner for her 80 wedding guests.[38] Kansas homesteader Evan Jenkins wrote about the wedding feast he attended during the 1870s:

> Such a dinner! It seemed the culinary skill had been taxed to the utmost to prepare the bountiful repast spread before the assembly -- roast turkey, pyramids of cake, columns of pumpkin pies, superb coffee, goblets of sweet milk, neatly indented rolls of choice butter, &c., &c . . . ."[39]

Wedding feasts emphasized the importance of kinship and friendship ties and allowed women to express their support for those who were establishing new families in their communities.

Women also commemorated family ties through preparing special foods for birthday and anniversary parties. While homesteading in Kansas, Flora Moorman marked her wedding anniversary by cooking a special dinner of "a good splendid cake . . . light bread, butter, gravy, tea, ham meat, cake and peaches.[40] Women also reinforced their friendships by producing gifts of food for other women's important family events such as births and holidays. When one of Flora Moorman's neighbours delivered a baby girl, another woman

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38 Mrs. Robert Bagby, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 44-45.

39 Evan Jefferson Jenkins, The Northern Tier: or, Life Among the Homestead Settlers (Topeka, KS, 1880): 152-159, quoted in Dary, Seeking Pleasure in the Old West, 163.

40 Flora Moorman, "I Think I will Like Kansas": The Letters of Flora Moorman Heston, 1885-1886," Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Summer, 1983): 70-95.

"sent her some butter and canned peaches."[41] The previous winter, Moorman reported that her new neighbour had "sent her little boys over with a big cabbage head for [their] Thanksgiving dinner."[42] Gifts of food held special significance for people who faced frequent food shortages and who, even during good times, were unable to find many of the items they had taken for granted back home.[43] Women also supported their friends by cooking meals for them and their families during times of sickness and by taking food to the homes of the bereaved to be shared among mourners after the funeral.[44]

The love, sympathy, and support that women expressed for their family and friends through their culinary efforts were the same feelings which inspired women to prepare special dinners for family and church communities following church meetings.[45] Women began cooking and baking on

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41 Ibid.

42 Moorman, "I Think I will Like Kansas."

43 Lowenberg, _Food and Man_, 145.

44 Louise Pound, "Some Old Nebraska Folk Customs," in _A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore_, edited by Roger Welch, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 197; Riley, _The Female Frontier_, 73, 100; Riley, "Women's Responses," 181.

45 Churches were an important part of the spiritual and social life of frontier farm women who were particularly active in establishing religious communities. Sabbath meals were widely recognized among trans-Mississippi homesteaders. See Luchetti, _Home on the Range_, 167; Myres, _Westering Women_, 205.

Saturday to have a proper Sunday dinner ready after church.[46] In addition to preparing memorable feasts of fried or roast chicken, cakes, pies and bread for their immediate families, women often fed members of their church families, which could include other relatives, neighbors, friends and fellow congregants. Chestina Allen wrote in her diary, "This pleasant Sabbath the northern Methodists held their first quarterly meeting at the new log house of Esq. Dyer. 18 individuals dined at our house on baked beans, plum pudding, bread and butter."[47] Nebraskan Barbara Levorensen remembered that, in addition to the food they enjoyed at the Sunday dinner table in her home, her mother also provided guests with an evening lunch to sustain them on their trips home:

> Mama would boil some eggs and open a tin or two of red salmon. She would place the salmon on a platter and the hard-boiled eggs, cut in half, around it. Unless she had enough dried apple or prune sauce on hand, she would open a can of sliced peaches. A plate was heaped high with yesterday's bread. A bowl full of cream, and butter and cookies, were also set out, and there was coffee for all. [48]

The meals which followed church meetings were not limited to private homes. Women of some congregations prepared dinners

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46 Luchetti, Home on the Range, 168.

47 Chestina Bowker Allen, "Kansas Frontierswomen Viewed Through Their Writings: The Diary of Chestina Bowker Allen," edited by Glenda Riley, Kansas History, Vol. 9, No. 2, (Summer 1986): 83-95.

48 Barbara Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," 188-189.

or picnics to be enjoyed by everyone present, a practice which extended religious services into social opportunities. South Dakota pioneer Sophia Marrington remembered that the women in her area prepared for monthly congregation meetings for days as "all the bread and cakes had to be baked at home, and it took a considerable amount of food to satisfy the appetites of all the people who came such a long, slow distance."[49] Whether they took place in private homes or at the church, the Sunday dinners which women prepared provided a medium through which settlers expressed their membership in a closely connected group which both symbolized and celebrated the family and community.

Like church meetings, the school calendar was an important determinant of community-wide feasts. Frontier women showed their appreciation and support of teachers through end-of-school picnics, periodic dinners, and parties at the school house. Many remembered how "on the last day of school, the women fixed dinner and went to the school house and had a 'last day' dinner with the teacher and pupils."[50] Nebraskan Berna Chrisman recalled how pioneers in her area surprised the new school teacher with an impromptu gathering: "Mr Holcomb made this note in the

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49 Mrs. Roy Roseth, Chronicles of the Deep Creek Church and Community (Pierre, South Dakota, 1955): 35-6, quoted in Nelson, After the West Was Won, 74.

50 Blake/Gregory Manuscript, The Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

visitors' record, 'All fetched dinner and gave teacher a complete surprise. A good dinner and a good time; will not soon by forgotten, especially by the teacher.'"[51]

In addition to Sunday dinners and school picnics, fundraising pie-suppers and box lunches, homesteaders gathered for "melon parties, oyster suppers, chili parties, and other festivities,"[52] organizing social events around food. Peter Ebbesen, the son of Danish immigrants who settled in Nebraska recalled that "it was the custom to invite the entire settlement to a great feast and dance once one had finished building a new, larger sod house with a board floor inside. . . . At these occasions everyone really made merry. Naturally abundant food was served, two or three times in the course of the night."[53] Women created and served midnight suppers, harvest feasts, holiday dinners, and other festive meals.[54] They cooked for days in advance for many of these events, and for the larger

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51 Berna Chrisman, "Cooperville School and Early News Items," Pioneer Stories of Custer County, 125-126.

52 Dary, Seeking Pleasure in the Old West, 148-197; Kenny Brown, "Building a Life: Culture, Society, and Leisure in the Cherokee Outlet," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 71, No. 2. (1993): 174-201.

53 Peter Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairie: Recollections of Peter Ebbesen," edited and translated by William J. Orr, Nebraska History, Vol. 64, No. 1, (Spring, 1983): 96-127.

54 Nelson, After the West Was Won, 61-80.

parties, "cooked everything that they had."[55] Ida Mae Zickrick made "many loaves of bread, cakes, and pies" for dances at her South Dakota ranch where homesteaders came from up to sixty miles away.[56] Another South Dakota settler "baked bread nearly every day [to] make the sandwiches"[57] for literary meetings that were attended by up to 100 people.[58] Bessie Lumley and her husband often gave dances for which "People came from miles around just for the lunch of chicken sandwiches, pickles, homemade angel food cake, and coffee."[59] While dances, literaries, and other parties provided entertainment and a way for settlers to socialize, it was through the act of sharing the food women had prepared that former strangers came to see themselves as companions.[60]

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55 Mrs. Thomas Ballard, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 165-166.

56 Ida Mae Zickrick, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 436-437.

57 Martha Babcock, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 42-43.

58 Ibid.

59 Bessie Lumley, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 238-241.

60 Because the act of eating together most often occurs among family members, sharing food with those outside the family symbolizes a kinship connection and establishes those who do so as companions, which literally means "sharer of bread." See Lowenberg, Food and Man, 146; Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal", 256; Mary Douglas, In the Active Voice. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 86; and Maquelonee Toussant-Samat, The History of Food, English translation by Anthea Bell (Cambridge, Mass., Basil Blackwell, 1994), 231.

Communities also gathered at churches and school houses for the ritualized feasts that celebrated national and religious holidays. Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners were the most common holiday feasts which brought together entire communities. Nebraska schoolteacher Sadie Smith recalled a Thanksgiving dinner she attended: "As the custom of the town is for everyone to take dinner downtown with whichever church makes the dinner, we went down."[61] When Orpha Le Gros arrived in Rapid City just before Christmas, 1876, her family and two others were the town's only residents. But the "women felt there should be a community dinner on Chrismas."[62] With no shops or markets, the women rummaged through their meagre supplies to create a Christmas dinner whose preparations "rivalled those of the Cratchit family in Dicken's Christmas Carol."[63] Holidays also allowed women to express their love of family, friends, and community by preparing time consuming feasts and special treats which reflected their cultural backgrounds. Norwegian women made molasses cookies, deep-fried cakes, and served quivering, white lutefisk (dried and reconstituted fish) with boiled potatoes for their Christmas holiday celebrations, while

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61 Sadie B. Smith, "A Nebraska High School Teacher in the 1890's: The Letters of Sadie B. Smith," edited by Rosalie Trail Fuller, Nebraska History, Vol. 58, No. 4, (Winter, 1977): 447-474.

62 Mrs. Orpha Le Gros, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 174-175.

63 Ibid.

American women made popcorn balls, and scrounged area general stores to find cranberries and oranges for their children. Swedish women produced traditional Christmas smorgasbords which required them to order ingredients more than a month in advance.[64]

By taking the time and expending the effort to organize feasts and cook the special foods which defined the holidays, women did much more for their frontier societies than simply providing "collections of nutrients on a table."[65] They provided tangible markers of social identity and created a specific context for people to perform and affirm their roles as community members.[66] Sharing food at holidays, harvest feasts and other gatherings underscored common interests and forged pioneers' sense of community with other settlers across townships, counties and regions. Women's contributions were essential to these events. Their culinary responsibilities brought them together in one another's kitchens where they shared ingredients and equipment and worked together to feed husbands and children, friends, extended family, neighbours and various passers-by. And, women's position as the

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64 Riley, The Female Frontier: 72-73; 98-99; Riley, "Women's Responses," 180; Myres, Westering Women, 180-81.

65 Humphrey and Humphrey, "We Gather Together", 2.

66 Humphrey and Humphrey, "We Gather Together", 3-11; Lin Humphrey, "Soup Night," 66; Lowenberg, et. al., Food and Man, 122, 156-158.

primary producers of food and preparers of meals afforded numerous opportunities to create and nurture friendships with people who had previously been strangers. Clearly, women's culinary skill and efforts permeated every level of society and functioned as the basis of social life across the farming frontier.

## CHAPTER THREE:

## THE FLAVOUR OF FINANCE: THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF WOMEN'S CULINARY LABOUR

*First month, honey month,*
*Next month like pie;*
*Third month, you dirty bitch,*
*get out and work like I.*[1]

This jingle about marriage, widely known in nineteenth-century midwestern rural communities, reveals America's paradoxical attitude toward women's domestic labour. The contradiction between the romantic social ideal of the "angel of the hearth"[2] and the nation's continued refusal to proffer status or economic reward for managing and working in the private household has affected women for at least three hundred years. Since the colonial era, the

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1 Nineteenth-century folk rhyme quoted in John Mack Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 126.

2 This term was one of many euphemistic titles bestowed on nineteenth-century women through the ideology, rhetoric, and prescription of domesticity. Some of the numerous discussions of domesticity in America include: Sara Evans, Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 45-58, 67-70, 93-101; Jeanne Boydston, "The Pastoralization of Housework,"in Women's America: Refocusing the Past, 3rd edition, edited by Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 148-161; and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," American Quarterly, Vol. XVIII, (1966): 151-74. On frontier domesticity, see Robert Griswold, "Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the American West in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,"in Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives, edited by Lillian Schlissel, , Vicki Ruiz, and Janice Monk (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 15-34.

mechanics of capitalism[3] combined with the patriarchal underpinnings of American society,[4] have caused women's household labour to be disassociated from the commercial marketplace.[5] Nevertheless, women's household labour -- particularly that related to food and meal production -- has been a significant force in the development and maintenance of American communities.

The rural communities that developed on the Great Plains farming frontier during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide an excellent arena in which to explore the economic significance of women's culinary labour. Because much of this work was performed in private

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3 During the past two decades, a small number of scholars have begun investigating the relationship between capitalism and women's unpaid domestic labour. Some of these works are Ann Oakley, The Sociology of Housework (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Wally Seccombe, "The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism," New Left Review, Vol. 83, (January - February, 1974): 3-24; and Sarah Berk, Women and Household Labor, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980).

4 In her essay on scholarship that investigates the construction of "separate spheres" ideology, Linda Kerber notes the widely acknowledged observation that male status and power in America has traditionally been achieved through distance from feminine symbols and characteristics. See "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History, Journal of American History, Vol. 75, No. 1, (1988): 9-39.

5 Jeanne Boydston describes the process through which women's household labour was separated from commercial symbols of value beginning in the colonial era. See Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp., Introduction, 24-29, 35-38, 44-45,51-55. See also, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "The Ways of Her Household,"in Women's America, 41-52.

households, its impact remains virtually invisible.[6] However, women's accounts reveal that their culinary labour not only had a decided economic impact on their households and communities, but also that frontier farm women were often shrewd managers of money and well aware of the importance of their efforts.[7]

In addition to producing goods and foodstuffs for household consumption, women on the farming frontier also fed farm employees, boarders, and other pioneers in exchange for labour or cash. They produced virtually all the eggs and butter sold in the frontier marketplace, as well as much of the bread, pies, cakes, and other prepared foods which many people -- particularly single men -- purchased either directly from them or through local stores. Women used their cooking skills to earn money for their families by establishing and working in restaurants, boarding houses, and by cooking in other women's homes. And they combined their culinary expertise with their organizational skills to raise money to build churches and schools and to establish and fund community projects and services.

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6 Boydston, Home and Work, xiv-xvi; Berk, Women and Household Labour, 5.

7 John Mack Faragher, "The Midwestern Farming Family, 1850" in Women's America, 119-132; and Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeir, "Agricultural Mechanization and American Farm Women's Economic Roles," in Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures, edited by Wava Haney and Jane Knowles (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 211-228.

This chapter expands on these themes to illustrate how women used culinary labour as an economic tool to support their families and contribute to the development of their communities. The first section focuses on the significance of this work to farming operations themselves, revealing how women's work with food furnished essential nonwage benefits to farm labourers, and provided families with consumer goods and cash income. The next section explains how women contributed to the development of infrastructure and services in their communities by producing, serving and selling food for fundraising events which financed the construction of churches and schools, raised money for charities, and paid the salaries of schoolteachers and clergy.

Sowing and harvesting crops on frontier farms required a great deal of physical labour. In many rural neighbourhoods, men joined forces with friends, neighbours, and relatives to work in each other's fields. Such exchanges did not usually require wages to be paid but for most, home cooked meals were the reward for helping with harvest or other farm building tasks such as barn raisings, fence construction, or well digging.[8] In some areas threshing crews were more common than cooperative labour and

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8 Garkovich and Bokemeier, "Farm Women's Economic Roles," 217. For more on work-related feasts, see Linda T. Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," Journal of the Folklore Institute Vol. XVI, No. 3. (September-December, 1979): 190-201.

in addition to the money the men in these crews were paid, they could also expect a hearty breakfast, lunch, supper, and possibly smaller meals throughout the day as part of their wage package. Barbara Levorensen's mother cooked five meals a day for up to twenty men during threshing season on their Nebraska homestead.[9]

In addition to providing meals for dozens of men, women continued producing and preparing food for their own families' consumption during the harvest, which often demanded that they spend up to 15 hours per day in the kitchen.[10] The family of Nebraska literary figure Willa Cather was a typical frontier farm family who relied upon the efforts of extended family and threshing crews to harvest their crops. In 1895, Cather's aunt Franc wrote a letter to her mother which opened with the line, "We are right in the midst of Harvest; and as you from past experience know exactly what that means, I do not need to explain."[11] After describing the men's activities, Franc described the success of her garden: "Had any quantity of

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9 Barbara Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," Norwegian-American Studies, Vol. 22, (Northfield, Minn.: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1965): 183.

10 Garkovich and Bokemeier, "Farm Women's Economic Roles," 217.

11 Franc Cather, "Cather Family Letters, 1895," edited by Paul D. Riley, Nebraska History, Vol. 54, No. 4, (Winter 1973): 611.

beans, beets, turnips, cucumbers, radishes, . . . I hardly know how I should have fed the crowd without the garden."[12]

Some farming operations that were large enough to employ regular "hands" included meals as part of their workers' pay. Farm wives and daughters produced the food and prepared and served the meals which fed these men, as in the case of Kansas homesteader Flora Heston who cooked "a good dose" of beans and cornbread for her family's farm hand every day.[13] On larger operations which employed more men, farm wives functioned as kitchen managers who hired their own cooking staffs and supervised their culinary activity. Emma Robertson was one such woman who, with the help of her staff of three, housed and fed a dozen hands and occasionally served crowds of up to 30 on her family's Nebraska ranch.[14]

Emma Robertson, like innumerable other frontier farm wives, also contributed to her family's income by producing free lunches and other refreshments which were an expected component of farm and livestock sales.[15] An advertisement

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12 Franc Cather, "Cather Family Letters," 612.

13 Flora Moorman Heston, "I Think I Will Like Kansas: The Letters of Flora Moorman Heston, 1885-1886," Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, Vol. 6, No. 2, (Summer, 1983): 91.

14 Emma Robertson, "The Ranch Letters of Emma Robertson, 1891-1892," ed., James E. Potter, Nebraska History, Vol. 56, No. 2, (Summer 1975): 221, 225.

15 Linda Humphrey, "Small Group Festive Gatherings," 198.

published in the North Bend Argus on March 21, 1891 announced that "Free Lunch Will Be Served" at a horse sale conducted at an area farm.[16] Whether the vast quantities of food consumed by farmers, labourers, and customers were produced by neighbourhood wives working together at harvest time or individual women on a daily basis, the economic importance of women's efforts in farmhouse kitchens cannot be denied. It paid for men's labour, added value to wages, and produced a collateral element for the transaction of farm business. Although it was unrecognized as cash exchange, the skill and energy women expended in cooking enormous breakfasts, lunches, dinners, harvest feasts, and refreshments for farm sales was vital for conducting the business of frontier farms.

Another way women contributed to their household economies through their kitchens was by cooking meals for other pioneers, for service people, and for officials who were passing through their areas.[17] Flora Heston boarded one of her neighbours while his house was being built in exchange for his labour, and also reported that she cooked

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16 Ibid., 227.

17 Glenda Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed: Women on the Iowa Frontier, 1833-1870," Pacific Historical Review, Vol. 49, (May, 1980): 264; Glenda Riley, The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains (Lawrence: University Of Kansas Press, 1988), 119.

for the county surveyor who, in addition to assessing her family's property, paid her "75 cents besides."[18]

Women also cooked for other homesteaders in order to barter for goods or gain services. South Dakota homesteaders William and Carrie Miller gained the eager assistance of area bachelors in building their first house by inviting them in for meals which "gave them the opportunity to eat a woman's cooking and visit awhile."[19] Likewise, Bertine Sem used her cooking skills to obtain the field labour she needed to operate her own farm. After immigrating to her North Dakota homestead by herself in 1902, this industrious young Norwegian woman cooked and cared for a neighbour's wife and new baby in exchange for his breaking 15 acres of her land. At harvest time, Sem managed to have her flax threshed by cooking for another farmer's crew. With the earnings from her first year's crop, she was able to build a small house to replace the tent she had lived in for three months.[20] After only a year on her homestead, Sem's "reputation as a good cook, especially with bread and pastries," had become so well

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18 Robertson, "Ranch Letters," 77, 79.

19 Paula Nelson, After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 59.

20 Erling N. Sannes, "Free Land for All": A Young Norwegian Woman Homesteads in North Dakota," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains, Vol. 60, No. 2, (Spring 1993): 25-26.

known that her bachelor neighbours were eager to help her break more of her land and pick up rocks in exchange for her home baked goodies.[21]

Because they were the predominant producers of such scarce and highly demanded goods, women also played a major role in their local and regional economies.[22] The money raised through their milk, butter, egg, and vegetable production was often the only regular income that most families could rely upon and "sometimes made the difference

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21 Ibid.

22 Joan Jensen's research has revealed the powerful role women's butter making played in developing the Mid-Atlantic frontier economy. Although I have not discovered a comprehensive study on the economic significance of Great Plains farm women's butter making efforts, from the secondary sources and primary documents I have surveyed it appears that these activities were as important to their region as were those in Jensen's investigations. See Joan Jensen, _See With These Hands: Women Working on the Land_, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), 35; Joan Jensen, _Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Joan Jensen, "Butter Making and Economic Development in Mid-Atlantic America from 1750 to 1850," in _Women and Power in American History_, edited by Kathryn Kish Sklar and Thomas Dublin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991): 106-118. For basic descriptions of frontier women's food production for distribution to local markets, see Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed," 263; Riley, _The Female Frontier_, 146-147; Sandra Myres, _Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915_ (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 240-241; Deborah Fink, _Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940_ (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 51, 67-68; Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire," 307-10; and Nelson, _After the West Was Won_, 41-60.

between success and failure."[23] Butter was the most valuable commodity produced by women across the farming frontier, and residents of frontier towns were "dependent on the surrounding farms"[24] for this product. Butter was not only exchanged at local markets but was distributed beyond immediate regions as well. North Dakota pioneer Elizabeth Keystone churned, paddled, packed, and sold eight to ten pounds each week. In a letter to her sister on May 9, 1886, Keystone wrote: "Butter is twenty cents now. Merchants don't buy only butter enough to supply the home demand."[25] This indicates that merchants were buying and distributing Elizabeth's butter beyond their local markets.

Numerous women reported substantial earnings from their butter production. Sarah Fargo's grandmother "put up butter in one hundred pound firkins" to send to nearby Deadwood, South Dakota where it sold for one dollar per pound during

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23 Allan Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire,"in The Oxford History of the American West, edited by Clyde Milner, Caroll O'Connor, and Martha Sandweiss, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 308. See also, Riley, "Not Gainfully Employed," 263; and Gilbert Fite, The Farmer's Frontier 1865-1900 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), 47.

24 Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," 191.

25 Elizabeth Keystone, "All Well and Hard at Work: The Harris Family Letters From Dakota Territory, 1882-1888," edited by Paula M. Nelson, North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains, Vol. 57, No. 2, (Spring 1990): 35.

the late 1870s.[26] Kansas homesteader Flora Moorman Heston reported to her family that she had "churned ten pounds of butter [and] sold five pounds last week at twenty-five cents a pound."[27] Although historians have joined frontier farmers in their belief that the monies produced from the sale of women's dairy and poultry products constituted "secondary"[28] incomes, the fact remains that without this source of financial support, many frontier farms would have failed.

As there was often "no other currency"[29] in frontier areas, many families exchanged women's produce at local stores for granulated sugar, coffee, and other grocery items they did not provide for themselves. Barbara Levorensen remembered the first thing her mother did upon arriving at the country store was to sell her butter and eggs, explaining that in her family "there seemed to be a hard and fast rule that the butter and egg money should pay for all

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26 Sarah Fargo, Biography in Daughters of Dakota: A Collection of Pioneer Women's Biographies and Autobiographies Compiled by the Federated Women's Clubs of South Dakota, Vol. XXXIII, (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society, Report and Historical Collections, 1966), 134. [Hereafter cited as Daughters of Dakota].

27 Heston, "I Think I Will Like Kansas," 88-9.

28 Fink, Agrarian Women, 66.

29 Peter Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairies: Recollections of Peter Ebbesen," edited and translated by William J. Orr, Nebraska History, Vol. 64, No. 1, (Spring 1983): 117.

grocery purchases except hundred-pound sacks of flour."[30] South Dakotan Mrs. Robert Bagby recalled how as a child she and her brother and sister would carry a bucket full of eggs into nearby Okobojo to trade for "more groceries than [they] could carry home in the bucket."[31] Another woman recalled that she "churned and delivered butter for 10 cents per lb. and got seven cents per dozen for eggs."[32]

During successful years when families weren't completely dependent on egg and butter money for survival, the income produced by women's culinary labour allowed frontier farm families to purchase non-essential groceries as well as cloth, dry goods, furniture, and other household supplies.[33] Nebraska homesteader Joanna Hickenbottom maintained her family's "store bill for groceries and clothing"[34] with profits from the flock that she raised with five chickens and a borrowed rooster.[35] Although in

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30 Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," 191.

31 Mrs. Robert E. Bagby, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 45; Mary Roets Hood, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 184.

32 Jennie Wentworth Steele, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 349-50.

33 In many farm households, there existed a dual economy through which women's income supported the needs of the household, while the more sporadic income men produced through the sale of crops and livestock went back into the farm itself. See Fink, Agrarian Women, 67.

34 Mrs. Joanna Hickenbottom, "Two Homesteaders Wed," in Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska, (Broken Bow: Custer County Chief, 1936), 141-143.

35 Ibid.

some areas women continued to spin and weave their own cloth well into the nineteenth century, many women on the Great Plains sewed dresses, bonnets, underwear, and other attire for their entire families from cloth available in local general stores. It was common for women to take "eggs and butter to the general store to exchange for [calico]."[36] Clara Martin's mother bought herself "a new Singer Sewing machine" with proceeds from her butter and egg money.[37]

In addition to trading for groceries and other goods with local merchants, women established their own food-related businesses and maintained their own customer bases. Oklahoma homesteader Mary Austin recalled how she used 20 cents that her mother had sent her for stamps to create a successful poultry business through which she bought furniture for her new house.[38] Oklahoman Sophia Qullin raised turkeys and sold them in a nearby market for three cents a pound.[39] Numerous frontier farm women described

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36 Martha Ann Andrews, Interview, Works Progress Administration Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 2, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Western History Collection): 404-413. [Works Progress Administration Indian Pioneer Papers hereafter cited as Indian-Pioneer Papers]. [University of Oklahoma Western History Collection hereafter Cited as UOWHC]. See also Flora Belle Simmons Ramsey, letter to her granddaughter, Flora Belle Simmons Ramsey Collection, UOWHC.

37 Clara Martin, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 249.

38 Mary Austin, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 3: 356-365.

39 Edna Hatfield, Quillin Manuscript, Edna Hatfield Collection, UOWHC.

how they earned cash by supplying food or cooking services to other pioneers. Minnie Meier and one of her neighbours made butter, packed it in jars and went into their nearby South Dakota town every other week to "peddle it from house to house for 10 to 12 cents a pound."[40] Levorensen's mother and a nearby neighbour woman worked together to produce and package butter for sale to "special customers."[41] South Dakotan, Sarah Cooper had a client list that not only included individual households in her area, but because of her butter making reputation, "she was able to get a premium price for selling it to the officers at Fort Sully."[42]

In undeveloped rural areas, a woman's ability to bake bread was an asset to the family coffers. For instance, the baking skill of Martha Babcock, a South Dakota pioneer who operated a sheep farm with her husband, was well known and widely sought throughout her region. She recalled that her "usual days baking was 14 to 16 loaves of bread which she sold for 5 cents a loaf."[43] Flora Heston, a Kansas homesteader, wrote several letters to her mother and sisters describing her bread baking business which served male

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40 Minnie Pietersen Meier, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 259.

41 Levorensen, "Our Bread and Meat," 192.

42 Sarah Ann Cooper, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 96-99.

43 Martha Babcock, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 42-43.

homesteaders without wives to cook for them. In April, 1885, she wrote that she sold "bread to the fellows that batch around here," explaining how she "sold $4.50 worth in less than two weeks . . . [at] three small loaves for a quarter."[44] On May 10, Flora reported that she had sold "about $7 worth of bread" and assured her mother that she could "more than keep [her family] in flour by selling bread."[45] Another woman recognized a hungry market in her South Dakota community and baked bread to support her two children after divorcing an abusive husband.[46] In addition to butter, eggs, and bread, women made and sold other foods to their friends and neighbours. Babcock recalled how she purchased apples by the barrel and lemons at 10 cents per dozen to make apple and lemon pies which she sold for 5 cents each.[47] Nebraskan Peter Ebbesen's mother learned to make maple syrup and "cooked sorghum for the whole [Danish] settlement with a profit from every eighth gallon."[48]

For people who lived in the towns around which homestead communities were built, women's culinary experience offered a means to establish or supplement family businesses. General stores were often family operations

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44 Heston, "I Think I Will Like Kansas," 82.

45 Ibid.

46 Agnes Wherle, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 419.

47 Babcock, Biography, 42.

48 Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairies," 114.

which sold baked goods and even entire meals in addition to their regular grocery and dry goods inventories. Eva Ash operated one such store with her husband in Crook City, South Dakota. When the couple decided to add a bakery onto their business, it was such a success that Eva "baked on an average, a sack of flour a day."[49] The Ashes eventually expanded the store to include a hotel and restaurant in which Eva functioned as kitchen manager and head cook.[50] Another couple who migrated to South Dakota to open a general store discovered that construction had not yet begun on their building when they arrived. After their first night sleeping on the ground, the pair found a tent hotel equipped with "a number of bunks, a long table and a cookstove" from which a "woman served meals to as many as she could."[51]

Temporary dining establishments were common in frontier towns and in them many women recognized and seized an opportunity to earn much needed income. Kate May was one such woman. The single mother of ten was operating a restaurant in Oklahoma City when she decided to race in the Cherokee Outlet land opening. Like other sharp entrepreneurs at the race starting line, May realized that

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49 Eva Ash, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 35-36.

50 Ibid.

51 Adelaide Wardell Egleston, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 116.

the thousands of homeseekers waiting in an area without restaurants or grocery stores offered a perfect chance to earn some cash. She opened an impromptu "brush arbor food service"[52] in which she served beans and cornbread to hundreds of hungry people. After her successful race for a homestead, May planted her farm "with corn, potatoes, watermelons, pumpkins, beans, cabbage, turnips and other vegetables"[53] to produce food for her family and for a restaurant she was opening in the newly established town of Perry.[54]

Women were particularly adept at turning their domestic culinary experience into business ventures and frequently established their own restaurants. In Perry, "women were found running restaurants in nearly every block."[55] Women who lived in Oklahoma Territory's black communities owned and operated their own cafes, catered special events and ran ice cream parlours.[56] Oklahoma pioneer John Adair recalled that two women in his rural community ran restaurants. One

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52 Henry Kilian Goetz, "Kate's Quarter Section: A Woman in the Cherokee Strip," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 61, No. 3, (1983): 246-267.

53 Ibid.

54 Goetz, "Kate's Quarter Section."

55 Robert E. Cunningham, Perry, Pride of the Prairies (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Perry Chamber of Commerce, 1973), 24.

56 Linda William Reese, "Race, Class and Culture: Oklahoma Women, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1991), 116.

of the most famous was run by Mrs. Sarah Coody whose "dinners and suppers were known far and wide."[57] Another Oklahoman described how the saloons in frontier Keystone competed for daytime business by offering free lunch counters stocked with "a surprisingly large choice of food."[58] The menu of one such establishment boasted "Possum dinner . . . cooked by an old German woman," which was a particular favorite.[59] Even if women weren't owners or managers of public eating establishments, their culinary experience provided them with a skill and a means to earn a living.[60] One North Dakota woman not only supported her family but managed to find husbands for her several daughters by providing kosher meals for the bachelors in her small orthodox Jewish settlement.[61] South Dakota homesteader Margaret Knutson got a job cooking at a popular restaurant during the 1880s after being widowed with seven

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57 John Adair, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 139.

58 Sherman Ackley, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 106.

59 Ibid.

60 Riley, The Female Frontier, 114-5, 146-7; Myres, Westering Women, 242-3.

61 Robert J. Lazar, "Jewish Communal Life in Fargo, N. Dak: The Formative Years," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains, Vol. 36, No. 4, (Fall, 1969): 353.

children. She earned enough money to feed her family, maintain her farm operation, and buy a team of oxen.[62]

Domestic service was the most common form of employment for women on the western frontier.[63] Experienced cooks were in great demand, allowing women to earn money by cooking in private homes, on farms and ranches, in boarding houses, and in institutions such as schools and orphanages. Lucy Auldridge reported that as a young widow she made her living as the live-in cook for the Dalton gang.[64] Dicey Adams cooked for the Creek orphanage near her Okmulgee home and later took a job cooking at a ranch where her duties included milking up to 20 cows per day.[65] Emma Robertson employed two girls and "a woman, past fifty years of age" at different times on her Nebraska ranch.[66] And many black women in Oklahoma Territory hired themselves and their daughters out as cooks and domestic labourers for which they

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62 Margaret Knutson, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 217-218.

63 Riley, The Female Frontier, 114-5, 146-7; Myres, Westering Women, 242-3. See also David M. Katzman, Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978); and Faye Dudden, Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).

64 Lucy J. Auldridge, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 3: 318.

65 Dicey Adams, Interview, Indian-Pioneer Papers, Vol. 1: 169.

66 Robertson, "Ranch Letters," 226-227.

received "pennies per day" and left-over food and clothing as part of their wages.[67]

The amount of money women earned by cooking and the circumstances which defined their efforts differed greatly. While some women were owners and operators of restaurants, boarding houses, and ranches, others worked as their paid employees. Yet, these women were bound, at least in part, by their common need to earn money and their shared role as culinary labourers in their communities.

In addition, the economic power of women's culinary labour stretched beyond the walls of their own kitchens and homesteads and past their family pocketbooks to play an important role in developing the infrastructure and social services of their frontier communities. After establishing their own homesteads, building and staffing churches and schools for their families were women's top priorities across the farming frontier.[68] To achieve these goals, women donated their time, labour, and foodstuffs to organize and stock pie suppers, box-lunches, tea socials and bake sales which raised money to pay for buildings and to house and feed clergy and teachers.

Norwegian women who settled in North Dakota were highly organized and established Ladies Aid societies soon after

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67 Reese, "Race, Class and Culture," 112; Riley The Female Frontier, 115-116.

68 Riley, The Female Frontier, 160, 164.

their migration to the Plains. Lutheran women's groups were committed to erecting and furnishing church buildings in their parishes and to financially supporting other projects they considered important. Known in Norwegian as *kvindeforeninger*, these women's associations raised more money "from sales and suppers than from direct contributions,"[69] and often had more money available than male-headed congregations or for that matter "any other organization in the area."[70] To raise funds for their projects, women took their homemade food products to sell at county fairs and donated the proceeds to the *kvindeforeninger*. They "fed huge crowds"[71] at fairs and organized, cooked and served picnics, suppers and dinners at their churches which "rivalled Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and Independence day in preparation, fellowship, and fun."[72] Menus at these events were extensive and reflected the hours of culinary work that women devoted to creating them. One North Dakota settler recalled the food she and

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69 Erik Luther Williamson, "Doing What Had to be Done": Norwegian Lutheran Ladies Aid Societies of North Dakota," North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains, Vol 57, No. 2, (Spring, 1990): 5, 8. See also N. C. Hagen, Vikings of the Prairie: Three North Dakota Settlers Reminisce (New York: Exposition Press, 1958), 63-65.

70 Ibid.

71 Williamson, "Doing What Had to be Done," 5, 8.

72 Ibid.

other Norwegian women prepared for fundraisers at their church:

> meat balls and gravy, head cheese, potato salad, fruit salads, baked pork and beans, sandwiches, coffee, pies, *lefsa*, *rulbakelse*, *sandbakelse*, and many other Norwegian baked goods of plain and fancy varieties such as womenfolk prepare hereabouts.[73]

Ironically, the constitutional dictates of the Lutheran church denied women political rights, yet it was the money raised by Ladies Aid societies which built its buildings.[74] Women were not allowed to participate in the business or leadership of their church, but their husbands and even their pastors requested and were granted loans from the funds women raised in part through their culinary labour.[75]

Women of various religious persuasions across the Great Plains farming frontier contributed to their communities through their cookstoves and fireplaces. Presbyterian women in Kadoka, South Dakota raised seventy-nine dollars to build a belfry for their church, paint the building, and purchase equipment by selling homemade foods and organizing, cooking, and serving a chicken-pie dinner to people in their community.[76] The Methodist Ladies Social Circle in Lawrence, Kansas raised funds for their church by

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73 N.C. Hagen, Vikings of the Prairie, 64. Hagen's italics.

74 Williamson, "Doing What Had to be Done," 7, 10.

75 Ibid., 8.

76 Nelson, After the West Was Won, 111.

soliciting and organizing festivals. For one such event, Elizabeth Duncan baked "a ham and a cake," helped staff a booth, and "washed dishes and cleaned up the hall" the day after.[77] Ladies Aid societies in Oklahoma Territory built churches "with proceeds from bake sales, dances, and socials."[78] And Protestant women in Yankton, South Dakota "kept up the financial and social activities of [their] church" by selling homemade crafts and serving suppers, and managed to build a church only a year after their minister arrived.[79]

Women considered schools as important as churches to the well being of their rural communities and raised money to build and equip these facilities by supplying cakes, pies, box meals, ice cream and other foods to community socials where men purchased them to eat among friends and neighbours.[80] Sarah Fargo remembered how Yankton women organized themselves into the Yankton Educational Aid Society, which organized "oyster suppers, [and]

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77 Katie Armitage, "Elizabeth "Bettie" Duncan: Diary of Daily Life, 1864," Kansas History, Vol. 10, No. 4, (Winter 1987/88): 287.

78 Kenny L. Brown, "Building a Life": Culture, Society, and Leisure in the Cherokee Outlet," Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. 71, No. 2, (1993): 181-2.

79 Sarah Ward, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 407.

80 Paula Nelson notes that schools and churches were more significant in rural areas than in towns and cities because urban areas offered more places for people to converge. See After the West Was Won, 106.

entertainments" to build a schoolhouse for their children.[81] The women raised more than a thousand dollars and paid for the building's construction in 1866.[82] While these events provided welcome opportunities for settlers to take a break from their heavy workloads and visit with friends and neighbours, the most significant aspect of such gatherings was the food. When settlers in Franklin Creek, South Dakota, held a social to finish their school house, the highlight of the evening was the auction of box lunches prepared by the women which raised $58.60.[83] Likewise, South Dakota homesteader and school teacher Bess Corey enlisted the culinary efforts of her pupils' mothers and raised $15.35 to help fund their school by holding an "entertainment" and box lunch auction in October 1909.[84] As well as ensuring the education of their young children, women supported and helped establish institutions of higher education through their culinary labour. Women in the black community of Langston, Oklahoma sold "pies, box dinners, and sandwiches at picnics, auctions, and public gatherings,"[85] to help purchase the land and equipment for a college which

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81 Sarah Fargo, Biography, Daughters of Dakota, 133-132.

82 Ibid.

83 Nelson, After the West Was Won, 106.

84 Paul Corey, ed., "Bachelor Bess: My Sister," South Dakota Historical Collections Vol. 37 (1974): 18, quoted in Nelson, After the West Was Won, 78.

85 Reese, "Race, Class and Culture," 122-123.

would offer teacher's training as well as study in agriculture, mechanics and industry. The school opened in 1898 and eventually grew into Langston University, the state's all-black college which still exists today.[86]

Pioneer women's community building efforts did not stop with cooking for their churches and schools. Once these fundamental institutions were established, women continued to fund projects they considered important to their communities by producing, preparing, and selling food. In Pierre, South Dakota, women formed the Women's Cemetary Association which gave dinners and "had hamburger stands on every festive occasion,"[87] and eventually raised fifteen hundred dollars which was used to build a fence around the grounds and create an entrance.[88] The women of Langston, concerned about their safety after dark, "sold needlework and gave socials to buy 15 gas lamps to light the main street at night."[89]

In addition to making material improvements to their towns through their culinary labour, women contributed their time, energy, and foodstuffs to ensure that their religious and educational institutions were properly staffed. Cash-

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86 Ibid.

87 Mrs. M. J. Schubert, Autobiography, Daughters of Dakota, 326.

88 Ibid.

89 William L. Katz, The Black West (Seattle: Open Hand, 1987), 300.

poor flocks and school districts often paid their ministers and teachers through a combination of a small stipend and food. In addition to organizing food related events to raise funds for salaries, women hosted "pound parties" to help subsidize community leaders. To these occasions, guests brought a pound of staple foods such as corn, flour, coffee, meat, or butter in exchange for the opportunity to socialize and enjoy "cake, ice cream, or some other treat."[90] After the party, the food items were presented to the preacher or teacher for whom the event was held. Some communities, like the families in Peter Ebbesen's Danish settlement, provided their clergy with food as part of their regular pay and benefits. Ebbesen recalled that when the boys in his community went to receive religious training from their parson, "our mothers used to send with us a bottle of cream, a piece of meat, and other provisions for the pastor's wife. That was the clergy's salary then."[91]

Frontier farm women paid for the services of religious and educational professionals and the buildings in which they worked by performing hours of unpaid culinary labour. They provided dining services for their communities, supplied settlers with much needed food products, and earned

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90 Brown, "Building a Life," 196.

91 Ebbesen, "Danish Pioneers on the Nebraska Prairie," 115.

money for farm households with their culinary skills. And, farm wives and daughters made substantial contributions to family operations by adding the value of solid meals to wage packages and farm transactions. Indeed, women on the farming frontier were not "dirty bitches" who needed to "get out and work" as the contemporary jingle suggested. They were already very busy in the kitchens of farmhouses, churches, and restaurants across the Great Plains. And their culinary labour was crucial to the economic life of their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Although women's culinary efforts provided a significant means of acquiring educational and religious leadership for their communities, helped raise funds to construct buildings, added value to farm business and kept many families solvent across the Great Plains, it is not possible to attach a dollar figure to the impact of this work. Until late in the nineteenth century, farm women were assessed by government census officials as being "not gainfully employed," so the incalculable hours of kitchen time they accrued to feed teachers and ministers, farm hands and harvest crews, will never be known to anyone but themselves. Few of the millions of pounds of butter and other food items that frontier farm women produced and distributed were inventoried. The dollars they earned were rarely recorded. The schools and churches and public works projects women built and funded through bake sales, pie suppers, and box lunches were often credited to men, taken over by the state, or completely forgotten.

Likewise, the social contributions women made through cooking and sharing food resulted from work that was commonly expected of them -- and therefore often taken for granted. In addition to enriching their towns with restaurants, churches, schools and social leadership through their culinary labour, women nourished frontier communities

by cooking to help those in need. They established and operated soup kitchens from church halls, they held bake sales and pie suppers to raise money for people who had lost their homes to fires or floods, who were suddenly widowed, or had otherwise experienced financial tragedy.

Frontier farm women strengthened community bonds by preparing and serving feasts that provided settlers with opportunities to publicly express their affiliation with others. The connections women established by cooking together and for one another formed the friendships and families from which new communities emerged. And, beneath the social framework that enhanced life, beneath the economic activities that fuelled growth, women's culinary labour was crucial to the most basic aspects of frontier community development: cultural identity and physical life. The cooking techniques and recipes that women had passed down for generations helped settlers define the cultural and ethnic makeup of their communities. The food related knowledge and experience that most women brought to the farming frontier helped them to identify food sources and allowed them to create meals out of unusual ingredients and often from very little food. The effort and ingenuity that these tasks required remains largely unrecognized. While many communities bear the names of male leaders and celebrate the success of their male farmers, they continue to overlook the fact that few would have succeeded without

the women who produced much of their food and prepared their meals. However, by their very existence, the towns and cities of the Great Plains stand in testament to the culinary labour of the women who nourished their populations.

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