The Well-fed Farm Family

THREE SQUARE MEALS A DAY

is an expression that must have had its origin on a farm. Anyway, that is what most farm families had—three meals daily, all of them “square.” The average family ate meat of some kind at almost every meal, flanked by generous portions of other substantial foods. Town people ate almost as heartily. They seemed to feel that no meal, even breakfast, amounted to much unless it included big steaks or bacon with potatoes or equally nourishing viands. Yet the proportion of fatties, urban and rural, was much smaller than in later times, probably because much more physical activity was then required, so that big food intakes were converted into muscular energy instead of going to form gobs of unwanted fat.

Farm families' bread was practically all home-baked, in the ovens of kitchen stoves—only one outdoor “Dutch oven” was known in the area. Unlike bread from modern commercial bakeries, loaves that came from home ovens, of course, never contained dough conditioners, special vitamin “enrichment,” sodium propionate, or other strange chemicals. A baking might number eight or more big loaves. If the last of a big baking became a little dry,
it might be toasted by placing slices on a hot stove lid or by holding them over glowing coals. Some dry bread was eaten as French toast, but it was generally called “fried bread.” At our house dry loaves were sometimes placed in a deep utensil above an inverted perforated pan and exposed to steam from boiling water. This made the bread almost as good as when it first came from the oven.

Flour came from home-grown wheat. Ordinarily, we took about four bushels to the mill at one time. The miller, of course, took toll from our wheat to pay for his services, so that we would get back about two bushels of white bolted flour, maybe half a bushel of bran, and a like quantity of “middlings” or “shorts.” The latter included principally the seed germs from the grains, composed of oils, proteins, and mineral elements, actually the richest and most valuable constituents of the wheat. In this by-product were also stores of vitamins, although at that time these elements were unknown and unsuspected. We used the bran and middlings, with some that we bought, as supplementary feeds for livestock.

Often, we boys ate some of the middlings ourselves. They were pleasantly chewy and agreeable to the taste unless they had become rancid, as they would with age. We liked to eat wheat, too. It had a pleasant taste, and when well masticated, became a waxy mass that could be chewed like gum. As a matter of fact, it was about equal to one kind of chewing gum then sold in stores. This gum, made of paraffine wax, sweetened and flavored, came in the form of round bars like sticks of candy. One had to grind on it steadily or it would crumble and slip down the throat. Chicle chewing gum was also offered in stores. It was much to be preferred, but, as is so often the case,
when one bought it he had to sacrifice much in quantity to get quality. Occasionally, we peeled long strips of the mucilaginous inner bark from slippery elm trees to chew. It had an agreeable flavor, and a cud of it would last for hours. At times we carried in our pockets rolls of the stuff big enough to keep us grinding several days.

One winter a family in the neighborhood bought some spring-wheat flour produced by a big Minneapolis miller. They were so loud and so enthusiastic in their praise of the superior quality bread it yielded that within a few weeks dozens of farmers thereabouts were swapping hard winter wheat from their bins for spring-wheat flour. It did make good bread, and some housewives declared it was easier to handle on baking day. Though more costly than flour from home-grown wheat, it is questionable whether it could have been proved to be superior in any respect.

Corn from farmers’ own fields also contributed much to their larders. It was by no means as important as a food item in our day, however, as it was in earlier times; for the pioneers it was a mainstay. Growing their corn involved some difficulties, but their real problem was getting it ground into meal—grist mills were few and far between. We were told that the first owner of our farm had to take his corn for grinding to Piqua, some fifty miles distant.

One of the first families to establish themselves in our county was that of William Miller, one of my father’s forebears. The mill nearest his clearing on the Ridge was at Willshire, the first organized town in the county. He had to allow two days for the 25-mile round trip because the roads were very poor and he always carried several bags of corn on the back of his horse—it was his custom to provide enough meal to feed his family and have a sur-
plus on which he could draw for the benefit of Indian friends.

Setting out for the mill one morning, he requested one of these red men to look to the safety of his family until his return. That night nine stalwart braves strode into the Miller cabin, wrapped themselves in blankets and, without a word, stretched out on the floor. Mrs. Miller, knowing nothing of her husband's arrangement, was puzzled and more than a little frightened. To be on the safe side, she took up a position beside the fireplace, within reach of the big poker, and sat awake all night, tensely watching for any hostile move. At dawn the Indians, as one man, arose and marched silently from the cabin.

As soon as our corn matured in the fall, we dried and shelled select ears and had the grain ground at the mill. Meal from new corn has a quality and flavor that are never equaled by meal from old grain. One year we had a surplus of giant yellow popcorn ground into meal. It was superior to ordinary meal, with a deeper yellow color and a more pronounced corn flavor. Prime roasting ears from the cornfield (generally called "hog corn") were frequently served in lieu of sweet corn. Homemade hominy and cracked corn or coarse grits from the store often appeared on farmers' tables. Rice was also a favored food item; cold boiled rice, with cream, nutmeg, and sugar was eaten at times as a dessert. Cooked rolled oats, served with sugar and cream, was a substantial part of many farm breakfasts.

Pancakes made from wheat or buckwheat flour or corn meal figured prominently in many a farm breakfast. Soda biscuits also had a big following. These were all prepared in the home kitchen as needed, almost wholly from farm-produced ingredients—no one then dreamed of commer-
cially prepared ready mixes such as are now widely used. Pancakes and hot biscuits, well buttered, were commonly eaten with sausages. Nearly always, there was also a generous supply of syrup. This might be sorghum, hot brown-sugar syrup, or a commercial product from a gallon container.

Farm families used apples in a big way. In winter Dad took ours as needed from the pit in which we had buried them, chopping through the frozen earth to get at them. They were always crisp and firm, with a slight taste and odor of the straw that had covered them. Other fruits were used freely, fresh in the summer, canned or dried in winter. In addition to garden-grown berries we occasionally picked some that grew wild, including gooseberries that, porcupine-like, bristled with sharp spines. Preliminary to their use, it was necessary to shake them vigorously in a covered pail, to break and flatten the stickers. Rhubarb, commonly called “pie-plant,” grew in every garden, and was widely used in pies and desserts. By way of variety, some at times stewed it with a few cherry leaves, which gave it a cherry flavor.

We ate melons at any convenient time, often right in the patch where they grew. Occasionally, soon after the first frost, we stored the best remaining watermelons inside a shock of corn. They kept in perfect condition for weeks, being especially enjoyable because they were chilled exactly right.

Almost every grocer kept a bunch of bananas hanging within convenient reach. They were sold by the dozen rather than by the pound, as in later times. Farm families did not buy them regularly, but they nearly always appeared at special big dinners. Oranges were consumed in
quantity only at the Christmas season; they were regarded as special treats. Coconuts, Brazil nuts, filberts, almonds, English walnuts, and pecans contributed to both Thanksgiving and Christmas feasting. Lured by the aroma that came from the roasters, farm people in town, at circuses, and at the fair ate many bags of peanuts, sold at what would now be regarded as extraordinary bargain prices. One could buy hot chestnuts in season at candy stores and fruit stands; none grew locally.

Generally, home-grown peaches were of inferior quality because they came from unbudded seedling trees. Riding in a train one time, Dad bought a few extra large peaches from the news “butcher.” He liked them so well that he brought home two of the seeds and planted them. Shoots that came from them grew vigorously and within a few years began to bear large, juicy peaches of excellent quality. This was a very unusual outcome, one that could be expected in not more than one case out of a hundred; the only way to be sure of quality peaches is to plant trees propagated by budding from stock known to be good.

It seemed to us boys that those who considered the paw-paw a delightful palate treat must have had a strangely perverted sense of taste. Year after year we tried some of the soft yellow fruit but were unable to enjoy a single bite—to us the taste was anything but agreeable. Our verdict was the exact opposite in the case of wild mushrooms. For us it was a most happy occasion when, mainly by accident, we came upon specimens of the sponge variety, the only one we knew to be non-poisonous.

Oysters, which came in flat gallon and half-gallon cans, appeared at times on farmers’ tables, especially at late evening suppers and parties. About the only other seafood
eaten was whitefish, packed in salt brine in wooden pails. The fish were soaked overnight in fresh water, then rolled in corn meal and fried, often for breakfast.

Eggs were eaten freely but no family could begin to keep up with the output. Some of the boys in school boasted of having eaten eighteen or twenty Easter eggs. We could believe this, but their stories of stealthily hiding eggs to get enough for this feast were taken with a large sprinkling of salt; no one, we felt sure, had to go to such lengths to enjoy all he could eat.

An enterprising store in a Welsh community some nine miles distant sent out a “huckster wagon” in summer. This was literally a store on wheels, carrying almost every grocery item and, in addition, such things as cotton yard goods, notions, brooms, and even kerosene. The spring-mounted wagon each day covered some part of the territory within a radius of thirty miles. Drawn by a span of wiry mules driven at a brisk trot, it reached each customer fairly regularly at a certain hour on the same day in each week. This saved as many a trip to town, since eggs could be sold or traded for needed supplies. As small children, we were always at hand to welcome our hucksters, knowing well that before he left, the shrewd fellow would present a stick of candy to each of us.

Milk was among the most abundant of food materials. It was used in about every known way, except that in many homes sweet milk went begging as a beverage— buttermilk was preferred. No dairy product except butter had much market value because a large part of the people in town kept cows. So, on the average farm, many gallons of good skimmed milk and buttermilk every day went to pigs and calves.
Commercial ice cream was eaten only at soda fountains and church socials. Milk and cream for commercial uses were carelessly handled. There was no pasteurization, no adequate refrigeration, little or no inspection anywhere; and ice used in freezers came from ponds unprotected against contamination. Consequently, some commercial ice cream was a menace to health. We youngsters made ice cream in winter by stirring sugar and flavoring extract into half-frozen milk. If the milk was not frozen, we added snow to the mixture. Often in summer, we made ice cream in a two-gallon freezer.

Some friends in school were loud in their praise of buttermilk pies. Eating such concoctions, we felt, would be the height of silliness. But we enjoyed pies that others doubtless would have regarded as strange and unorthodox. One was made from half-ripe grapes, another, from half-ripe tomatoes. We also liked pies filled with a mixture of sweetened vinegar, rich cream, and spices, thickened with cornstarch. This pie probably would horrify a dietitian, but we never worried about any dietetic defect or deficiency it may have had.

One day my brother and I caught and dressed a big possum. Against her better judgment, Mother roasted it for us to a perfect brown. We carved and ate, smacking our lips and swallowing with a great pretense of relishing the meat. Actually, each bite all but nauseated us; the animal was so fat that each morsel dripped with grease. We resolved that when we caught our next possum (fortunately, there never was a next) we would boil it and skim off the oil before it went into the oven.

A group of us one time dug a little pit, kindled a fire in it, and chucked in amid the smoking sticks several roasting
ears sheathed in their husks. Our cooking in this instance would have been voted a most dismal failure by any competent authority, but we shucked out the ears (only slightly warmed and strongly flavored by the kerosene used to start the fire) and ate them with gusto, all proclaiming that no corn was ever more delicious.

I once caught an exceptionally large turtle. Having read repeatedly that turtle soup is a surpassing epicurean delight, I determined then and there to put those glowing accounts to a practical test. Hatchet in hand, I put the big fellow on a block and teased him with a stick until he forgot his natural reserve and extended his neck beyond the shell. Quickly, I brought the hatchet down and severed his head. I set to work with hatchet, knife, and chisel to get that reptile meat out of the shell. Blood flowed freely. Soon everything, including my hands and the tools, was smeared with gore. My appetite for turtle soup waned rapidly as a very queasy feeling came over me. Within another minute, too sick to stand, I had to give up. I crawled away and lay half an hour under a shady tree. I then dug a deep hole and buried the bloody mess as quickly as possible.

The farm meat supply came from livestock grown on home acres. Cured pork was a basic element in the family fare during the greater part of the year. Butchering was a do-it-yourself project; generally it was on a co-operative basis, two or more neighbors—often brothers or other relatives—working together. Due to lack of refrigeration, the job had to be done after hot weather had ended. Ordinarily, one family killed a hog in October, the other family following suit a little later. Meat from each of these early butchering, salted but not cured for long keeping, was shared by the participating families.
Hogs were commonly killed by a blow on the head from the poll of an ax. Some preferred to shoot them. Although the hapless pig was a familiar domestic animal, the man or boy who did the shooting was often affected to some extent by "buck fever." He did his best to center the bullet slightly above an imaginary line joining the eyes. If he failed to hit the right spot, he might try again, or the pig might be felled by an ax blow. Whichever way the animal was brought down, someone at once plunged a long knife into its throat and severed the big blood vessels there. Boys spoke of this as "cutting the jugular"; actually, both the jugular vein and the jugular artery, as well as other blood vessels, were opened.

Someone transferred boiling water from a kettle to the scalding barrel and threw in a handful or two of wood ashes. By this time all blood had trickled away. The pig was plunged into the hot water and two men soused it in and out, turning it end for end and round and round. If this work was all done right, the hair and outer layer of skin slipped off easily. Using sharp knives, it took only a few minutes to get the skin perfectly clean and white—even the blackest pigs were white when this job was finished. In case the scalding went wrong in some way, it was necessary to shave much of the surface. This gave rise to the expression, "a bad scald," often used in reference to any kind of undertaking that had not come out right.

The carcass was now suspended, head down. An incision was made, extending down the soft underbelly, and the mass of abdominal viscera, steaming in the cool air, was rolled out. Heart and lungs were removed from the chest cavity, and the carcass was washed clean. Cutting it into conventional pieces after it had cooled and stiffened completed the job.
The main pig-butchering came after real winter had set in. It was handled in about the same way, except that it was on a scale several times as large, to provide meat for the ensuing year. One or more uncles, with their families, came to help with our butchering; later, we helped them. Occasional tasks were assigned to the older boys, but on the whole it was a red-letter day of boisterous play and pranks for the youngsters who had been allowed to take a holiday from school.

After the cooled carcasses had been cut up and trimmed free of surplus fat, loins and other lean parts were cut into small strips or cubes and ground into sausage. This work, altogether occupying a full afternoon, was done indoors. Salt and black pepper were mixed into the ground meat—nothing else was ever added. Then, a generous portion was fried in a skillet on the heating stove. The aroma that came from that frying pan was something that no one could resist. Although we had eaten a hearty meal only two or three hours before, all hands fell to and ate big helpings by way of sampling the sausage to make sure that it had been seasoned properly.

The following day all fat parts, cut into small cubes, were cooked and put through a press that squeezed out the lard in the form of a thin, clear liquid. The residue of fatty tissues at the bottom of the press became round disks of closely compressed “cracklings.” At times a few cracklings were baked in corn bread; some were fed to the chickens; the remainder were used for making soap.

Each family had its own pet recipe for curing hams, shoulders, and slabs of “side meat,” as most folks called bacon. Soon after butchering day, Dad rubbed a carefully proportioned mixture of salt, black pepper, brown sugar, and a small amount of saltpeter into our meat. This was
repeated several times, at intervals of a few days. We bought salt by the barrel, for this use and for the livestock. In the spring the meat was hung on rafters in the smokehouse and exposed to smoke from a fire in an old iron kettle on the earthen floor. Hickory wood was used for smoking, until we discovered that corncobs produced results quite as satisfactory.

Our home-cured bacon was never equal to good commercial bacon—it was too fat and not well streaked with lean. All who tasted the cured hams and shoulders, though, voted them superior on all counts to packers’ products. Everyone considered the fresh sausage, hearts, and livers far and away better than any sold by butchers. To assure quality, we saw to it that all meat animals were bled thoroughly and at once after killing, that all were eviscerated as soon as possible, and that all internal parts retained for food were taken out promptly, separated from other parts, and cooled rapidly in open air.

Chickens were often killed for the table by wringing their necks. One seized the bird by the head and swung it round and round until the body pulled away and dropped to the ground. We boys were squeamish about this method, and always chopped off the heads with an ax. We felt that the ax did the job quicker and more painlessly, and blood seemed to drain away more quickly.

Every winter we had a quarter or a half of beef for our larder from one of our own animals or from one butchered by a neighbor. The meat might be preserved by allowing large pieces to freeze, then keeping them in an unheated space. Always, some was cooked, covered with hot grease, and sealed in containers. Occasionally, sizeable pieces were salted and dried, becoming practically equivalent to the old-timers’ “jerky.”
One winter we butchered a lamb. There was so much prejudice against the meat that we were a long time getting it eaten. Some of us felt, and declared unequivocally, that we “just couldn’t go” mutton. A year or so later, Dad brought from the butcher a package of fresh meat that, when cooked, was eaten with keen enjoyment, all of us believing that it was exceptionally good beef. We sat shamefaced and silent when Dad disclosed, after the last morsel had disappeared, that we had just eaten mutton.

Some farmers now have their butchering done by professionals. Others buy dressed and packaged meats from custom butchers and store them in deepfreeze units. Much of the cured ham and bacon eaten at farm tables has been processed by commercial packing houses. Real homemade sausage and good home-cured hams are very hard to find.