The last crops of the century have now been harvested from fields and orchards. Despite their increasingly precarious position and in the face of occasional calamity, American farming families and rural folk remain fiercely proud. At a time when most of the foods widely available to us are intensively processed— even engineered— by global agribusiness, the old rural ways of producing, preparing, eating and thinking about food are traditions that culinary historians should not fail to record and to study. In this special issue of Repast, we examine an era when food remained close to the land where it was grown and to the people who worked hard to use it well.

Warning: mouth-watering reading ahead! Our writers have treated us not only to the sights and sounds but to some of the flavors of the farm. The hand-cranked eggnog ice cream recalled by Cecil Darnell in his essay “Hold the Lantern High” had a quality that could never be found in a supermarket: rich and crystal-free, it required continuous mixing in a small batch made from whole milk and without commercial additives. In “Pulling Together, Keeping Close,” Barb Ruch remembers baked ham and roasted pork loin made from cuts preserved in a farmer’s own hickory smokehouse, and homemade Thanksgiving pie made with pumpkins pulled from a sod-covered root cellar.

It is folly to try to compare the dishes of yesterday and today based solely on the finished product, without taking into account the labor that went into them. Imagine, as Mary Lou Unterberger allows us to, in her account “Finding ‘Milk and Honey’ on a Dust Bowl Homestead,” what was involved in a woman’s weekly bread-baking in Depression-era Colorado, where the yeast had to be fed potato-water one day ahead, and someone rose before dawn to build the fire, its temperature controlled solely by well-honed experience. The strength of families and 4-H Clubs and the bartering of goods and services mentioned by Mary Lou, the all-out threshing crews and communal meals mentioned by Barb, are vivid reminders that human food is a social product, and that even in times of great social stress no one need go hungry.

Cecil opens his reminiscences tellingly with an old dinner bell long since thrown into disuse by the loud clatter of tractors. He goes on to lament that the warm and intimate conclave of a barn at winter milking time is a relic of a way of life “gone forever.” For those, then, who produce our food, is there no future but one dominated by vast and impersonal forces? Two other essays suggest that things might be more complex than that. In Sherry Sundling’s true story “Spies in the Pickle Dump,” a gang of young girls on bicycles finds its imagination fuelled by their little town’s huge stash of cucumbers and tomatoes — not because these might be eaten locally, but because they might be sold to the huge Vlasic and Campbell corporations, and eaten by people halfway across the planet.

A similar pride in sharing locally grown food with the whole world is seen in “A Community Mobilized,” Jan Longone’s description of a visit to the annual tomato festival in Lauderdale County, Tennessee (or “Lawdry County,” as it was famously pronounced by local bluesman Sleepy John Estes). Andrew F. Smith, in The Tomato in America, has noted that agricultural fairs played a key role in diffusing food customs across the U.S.; for instance, cash prizes offered for home-canned tomatoes at fairs in Tennessee in the mid-1850s helped to popularize that new technology (p. 62). The continued vitality of hundreds of annual fairs like that in Lauderdale County suggests that in addition to tapping into community pride, they must also fulfill an important economic role.

This focus issue on rural foodways is only a first planting. We know that there are other readers who are still preparing the ground, gathering their thoughts. Those who are reluctant to mess with pencils or keyboards can easily be interviewed in the flesh. We are especially interested in rounding out the picture of farm life with the recollections of immigrant and African-American homesteaders. Every contribution is welcome, and we look forward to a second harvest in the not too distant future.
CHAA members Bill and Yvonne Lockwood have published their essay “Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways” in a new book edited by Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000; 544 pp., $24.95 paper, $49.95 cloth). An earlier version of this work was presented to us at our March 1998 meeting. Yvonne, Curator of Folklife and Extension Specialist for the Michigan Traditional Arts Program at the Michigan State University Museum, has pulled together a working group of 16-20 food specialists, representing some 8 states and Ontario, meeting at MSU in early 2001 to discuss Great Lakes regional foodways. Yvonne also reports that the MSU Library is planning to develop an endowment to expand its cookery collection.

On September 17 at Michigan State University, our honorary president Jan Longone gave the opening lecture at the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Midwest Jewish Studies Association. Jan spoke on “Satisfying the Appetites: The History of Jewish Cookbooks in America.” She indicates that this talk and topic were most timely, as it helped her compile the Jewish cookbook bibliography for CHAA members preparing for our December participatory meal.

Several local scholars have made recent contributions to the history of African-American foodways. Anne Lieberman Bower, Assoc. Professor of English at the Ohio State University at Marion, has written an introduction to the just-published facsimile reprint of *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000; 166 pp., $20 cloth). The book was first published in 1958 by the National Council of Negro Women, with journalist/historian Sue Bailey Thurman as editor and with recipes contributed from 36 states. Bower writes, “This book is a compendium of African-American history, arranged in calendar fashion. Recipes for everything from Harriet Tubman’s favorite cornbread to Lobster in Curry Sauce combine with anecdotes, historical descriptions, reproduced documents, drawings, and photographs to commemorate important African American individuals and historical events.” Bower previously edited *Recipes for Reading: Community Cookbooks, Stories, Histories* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1997) whose introductory chapter was written by our own Jan Longone. Denise Watson, an independent scholar in Detroit, participated in the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Popular Culture/American Culture Association, held Nov. 3-5 in Albany, NY. Watson presented a talk on “Codes of Survival: Vibration Cooking and the Narrative of Soul Food,” and also read her work “False Charms & Chitlins” from the anthology edited by Leslie Powell, *Food and Other Enemies: Stories of Consuming Desire* (Essex Press, 2000). William Whit, Assoc. Professor of Sociology at Grand Valley State University and President of the Association for the Study of Food and Society, discussed “Soul Food as a Cultural Creation” at the conference on “Grits, Greens and Everything in Between: The Foods of the African Diaspora and American Transformations,” held June 23-25 in Chicago. Howard Paige, an independent scholar in Southfield who addressed our group in Feb. 1988, traveled with the Lockwoods to the Chicago conference where he informally discussed the growing activity in historical African-American foodways.

Andrew F. Smith, food writer and historian at New School University in Manhattan, has written the introductory essay for the reprinted *Centennial Buckeye Cookbook* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2000; 288 pp., $55 cloth). The book was first published in 1876 as a fundraiser by women of the First Congregational Church of Marysville, OH and dedicated “to those American housewives who cannot afford to employ a French cook.” Sales in its first quarter-century exceeded one million copies. Smith has spoken to our group in the past about catsup and snack food.

Ari Weinzeig, CHAA member and a founding partner of Zingerman’s Delicatessen, was quoted by the *New York Times* in its July 14 story “Safety Concerns vs. Fear of a Velveeta Nation.” Ari registered his strong opposition to tightening restrictions on raw-milk cheeses, as contemplated by the FDA. Jewish cookery expert Joan Nathan recently ranked Zingerman’s as one of her 10 favorite delis in the U.S.

Contact *Repast* editor Randy Schwartz for further information about these opportunities:

- Jan. 15, 2001: Submission deadline for the journal *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* in its call for papers for a special issue on the geography of food.
HOLD THE LANTERN HIGH: MICHIGAN DAIRY MEMORIES

by Cecil E. Darnell

Cecil Darnell is a writer and photographer in Mason, MI. His work, appearing in over 50 publications, has focused on horses, farming equipment, and his memories growing up on a family farm near Barryton, in Mecosta County. In 1996 Mr. Darnell published a book, Hoofprints on the Road: Pleasures of the Journey.

Every farm had a dinner bell. Each bell had a distinct sound, often determined by the person pulling the rope. The overall quiet of the countryside allowed the dings and dongs of cast bells to roll out to the farmers performing their tasks with horses. When the bell rang, the horses would stop. They knew what time it was. It was time to eat and take a breather.

Then the tractor came. For a while, the bells still tried to do their job. The same bell would try to call the workers to dinner. It would try several times, but a man on a tractor couldn’t hear that distant bell. After repeated failures, it didn’t ring anymore. The dinner bell gave way to automation, only to return a generation later as a desirable antique.

Talking Time

The cows kept the barn warm. We named our cows: there was cow #1, cow #2, cow #3, with the names running to the exact same number as the cow herd at any particular time.

The winter path between the house and the barn was narrow, hard to walk, uneven, and changing, depending on weather, on whatever had been across it to crush it, and on a host of other forgotten factors.

There was something about the atmosphere in the warm barn at winter evening milking time that encouraged what we would today call “quality time.” While the warmth was important, there was also an intimacy in the barn during milking. The kerosene lantern hung on a rusty spike that had been driven into one of the hand-hewn beams for that assignment. It was natural to keep the lantern high to cast light and shadow as far as possible.

The cows lived directly under the haymow. The hay served as good insulation when stacked high in early winter. There were only a couple of windows in the milking area. Only a smattering of light ever invaded this conclave.

When the milk began hitting the bottom of the galvanized bucket, squirt, squirt, squirt, the hands got their coordination, and the sound of warm milk hitting the metal pail in spurts soon changed as the milk accumulating in the bucket muffled the sound of the process. The fast movement of the new milk created a foam on the top.

Once the milk was flowing, the mood was such that conversation was possible, even though the talkers couldn’t see each other. Maybe it was the fact that the other person is out of sight that made it easy to talk. It was a time to talk about the important things. The things that were really concerns: life, education, girls, sports, farming, family, the Almighty, the future, the past, even plans for the evening when the chores were finished.

Where do people talk in this modern world—in front of a TV set? While some chores will ever be constants in life, that special environment that permitted conversation while milking by hand in a cow-warmed barn, with a dim lantern hanging on a nail, in the middle of the winter: that is gone forever. But it still exists in my mind.

Threshing Time

Dutch Pitts still laughs about it. The threshing machine was at his farm. He lived a half mile south of us. In those days, it was common to “change work” with neighbors, especially at times when there was a lot of work to do in a short time. Threshing was one of those time-intensive situations.

Getting the grain from the field to the thresher, getting the bundles into the machine, getting the grain from the machines into the granary... all tasks were demanding and immediate. Weather was always an important concern. The threshing machine was scheduled for another farm immediately after this job was finished.

At the time, I must have been 15 or 16, a strong farm boy. Dutch got me on the detail of carrying the bags of grain from the threshing machine into the storage area, where they were emptied and the bags returned to be refilled. When one bag was filled, there was a lever that moved the grain flow from one bag to the other. When there were several wagons filled with grain bundles waiting at the thresher, the grain came out there awfully fast.

Young folks who didn’t know what was happening were often nudged into carrying the grain. Being young, it was an assignment where youth could be used and a person could be beaten down physically. That happened to me. By the end of the day I could hardly walk, let alone carry anything. When I had the chance to pass this experience on to another person, it took on a lot more humor than when it happened to me personally. Dutch still finds my experience humorous, still today, 45 years after the fact.

The Battle Over Butter

"Man cannot live by bread alone," or so we have heard. What that really means is that along with bread, some butter is needed to make it taste its best.

Butter has been around for a time. Butter churns decorate museums around the nation, and many of the different styles can be remembered by adults living today. Many adult museum visitors will recall having turned the

continued on next page
crank on a butter churn while visiting grandma on the farm.

Actually, the real butter struggle dates to my childhood a half century ago. It was then that oleo made its appearance for the first time. Farmers were not pleased. If their cream was not used to make butter, then they were hurting. As oleo (early margarine) gained some acceptance with the buying public, it became more of an irritant to the farmers.

We were farmers at that time. I had been assigned to crank the handle that turned the wooden paddles sticking into the cream, the paddles that eventually converted it into butter and buttermilk. But there was more to it than that. There was a fierce pride in the products that were turned out by American farmers.

With that early oleo, the taste wasn’t the big problem. It was the appearance that turned people off on the product for a time. It was the color of lard, which didn’t moisten the taste buds. Farmers fought to prohibit the manufacturers of oleo from coloring the new product to look like butter.

Those first containers of oleo were clear plastic bags that were flexible, allowing the oleo to be kneaded. In a small pocket on one side of the plastic container was a small amount of coloring that could be kneaded throughout the oleo. Once the mixture was completely meshed it took on the color of butter, but it was a serious challenge to get it mixed evenly.

Back in those days, there were no ads saying “I can’t believe it’s not butter!” It was an emotional issue, and the strong feelings lasted for years. When farmers are threatened, they can take an aggressive stance. Serving meals to farmers that do not include whole milk, real butter, eggs, beef, or other such staples can make them a touch testy.

Today that early battle is mostly forgotten. Oleo and butter share shelves in the supermarket. The color is already mixed into the oleo, and it is ready to spread. The consumer can choose what spread is preferred by the family.

But if his taster is finely tuned, the eater will tell in a moment if the spread is “real” butter. Can you tell the difference?

Gathering the Eggs

Of all living creatures, the chicken resists death with the greatest determination.

Every farm had a flock of chickens. They provided eggs, of course, but often also Sunday dinner. There was a special block of wood that was mostly reserved for chopping heads.

With chickens also go roosters, and every one we had was mean. A rooster would chase a boy whose only intent was to feed him some grain. Often, the most aggressive rooster would move right to the dinner plate.

The flock of chickens was often permitted to roam at will, seeking food from the earth. Some of the things that chickens found tasty didn’t impress picky people. Often, the chickens would find the best picking alongside the road, and when cars went by, the chickens didn’t always move quickly enough. If you ran over someone’s chicken, it was common courtesy to stop and notify the owner so they could salvage some food from the incident. A fresh-killed chicken could be eaten; one that was discovered later could not.

Gathering the eggs was one of the farm chores that could be done either by grownups or by kids. Chickens could have their own personality, and some would willingly give up their eggs while others didn’t take kindly to losing them.

Have you ever had a broken egg in your pocket? Can you imagine what it would be like? Actually, a broken egg in a pocket is just as unpleasant as it sounds. There were certain things that were supposed to be done, and carrying eggs in the pocket wasn’t one of them. But if Dad could carry eggs in a pocket with no problem, shouldn’t a boy be able to accomplish the same thing?

No. It doesn’t work that way. Eggs know who is carrying them. They are much stronger when they are in the pocket of an adult.

All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t clean those pants... let alone put anything back together again.

Old Time Ice Cream

After winter had ended and the snow and ice had left the fields, the yard, and the barnyard, we would still make ice cream sometimes.

We had an old wooden ice cream freezer. It was used at family reunions and other large gatherings, at those situations where it seemed desirable to go get a block of ice, put it in a burlap bag, and beat it into little pieces with the edge of a hammer. Sometimes in early spring, we would get snow from the woods before it melted, and use that snow instead of ice to make the ice cream.

The snow or ice chips would be packed into the space between the inner steel tank, which held the makings of eggnog ice cream, and the surrounding wooden barrel. One person would have to hold the freezer down while
SPIES IN THE PICKLE DUMP

by Sherry Sundling

Sherry Sundling is a longtime member of CHAA. A graduate of the University of Michigan with a degree in speech therapy, for the past 14 years she has been a supervisor in the UM residence hall dining system, working at East Quad and Bursley dormitories. Sherry has also had her own catering firm, and taught cooking classes at Kitchen Port in the Kerrytown shops. As is clear from this story, she has been fascinated by food since she was a little girl, Sharon Claxton, growing up in Michigan.

It was known by all of us as the Pickle Dump. There were five of us in our gang... and we had free rein of our village.

Sometimes someone would slip and refer to it as the Tomato Dump, but this would be greeted by hoots of derisive laughter from the rest of us. “Tomato Dump?! Tomato Dump?! They don’t dump tomatoes in there! Don’t you know anything?” At 10 or 12 years of age, it was very important not only to belong, but to be right, and such a faux pas was rarely repeated.

The foundation of our teasing was true enough, literally speaking, but in actual fact large amounts of both cucumbers and tomatoes appeared at different times during the heat of summer in the huge, open area off Main Street in our little farming village of Britton, MI, population 499. Situated between the even then historic-looking Britton Hotel and the small train depot hugging the railroad tracks, the dump was a place of much diversion for the five of us during the long and languid summer days.

At the far end of the lot stood the busy local grain elevator. With the continual comings and goings of loaded tractors and trucks, it was a focal point where many in the village gathered and got the latest news. Of course, it stood in need of being checked out by us kids daily. Mounted on our whizzing Schwinn’s, we’d twist and turn between people, loaded trucks, and tractors, with what we felt was unparalleled grace and aplomb before dashing off again.

It was not the grain elevator that held a fascination for us, but the four gigantic wooden vats dominating the entire area along the tracks. Looming high over our heads, our necks craning to see their tops, these mysterious sentinels held secrets just asking to be explored. We noticed a gently curved steel ladder bent over each rim, hanging down to about seven feet from the ground. By leaning a bike against the vat and standing on the bike seat, we were just able to reach the bottom rung of the ladder and to hoist ourselves up. Carefully we perched at the rim, balanced tenuously, with hands and feet pressed against the vat’s rim and walls. Looking into the vat and out over our new Britton domain, exhilaration swept over us: we were princesses of the realm! The townsfolk of Britton were under our command, subject to our every whim!

The faint aroma of years of pickle-making reached our nostrils. “Wow! Look at the size of this vat! It must be 1000 feet tall and a mile wide! I bet it holds three tons of pickles!” “Wow... do ya think Vlasic buys these pickles? Wouldn’t that be something! Vlasic pickles coming from little Britton, Michigan... Wow.” The very thought brought a moment of awed silence.

Mr. Kuster, the grocer, must not have known he was one of our loyal subjects. Soon he marched out of his shop and yelled, “You kids get down off’n there! That vat is over 15 feet high and 20 feet wide. If one o’ you fell into it you’d break your fool neck! And I see you up there, Sharon Claxton. If you don’t get down fast, I’m gonna call up your Dad!”

Shoot! My father was the town doctor. Everyone in town knew me, and it was hard to get away with anything. Sigh. Our reverie broken, we climbed down off our “castle” onto our bikes, and pedaled slowly away. We’d learned one thing: it’s best for princesses to climb up their Pickle Vat Towers on Sundays, when all the stores were closed!

One day in hot August, we heard the noise of engines. We had waited for this day all summer. Our gang had been on Cucumber Alert for two days, ever since we noticed workers cleaning and scouring the vats inside and out. Running excitedly to the street, we saw tractor after tractor pulling wagons, rumbling slowly down the streets of our village toward the Pickle Dump. The wagons were so heavily loaded with bushels of glistening green cucumbers that it seemed surely they would topple if just one more basket were piled on top. The magnificence of it all took our breath away. We jumped on our bikes and followed the parade.

Tractors and wagons were lined up for blocks, each waiting its turn to unload its crop. Late arriving farmers disembarked from their rigs and clustered in groups of 4 or 6 to talk about crops and the weather, sometimes politics. The farmers dressed in short sleeves or t-shirts, the older ones wearing coveralls and straw hats, the younger ones in blue jeans and billed caps advertising Pioneer Seed or Farmall. From countless hours in the sun they had “farmer tans.” These were independent, hard-working gamblers who annually risked all they had in hopes that the weather would be good, crop prices high, pests low and old equipment trusty.

When we thought no one was looking, we’d snatch a cucumber or two off the wagons and crunch contentedly while watching the ritual unfold. A portable elevator, such as is used to transport bales of hay from wagon to loft, had been placed by the unloading area. After each loaded wagon was weighed, a pair of muscular men would empty the baskets one by one onto the conveyor belt of the elevator. Up they’d travel, jiggled by the machine’s vibrations, finally falling over the edge and into the vat, landing at the bottom with resounding thumps.

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FINDING “Milk and Honey” ON A Dust Bowl Homestead

by Mary Lou Unterburger

Mary Lou Unterburger of Ann Arbor is a longtime CHAA member. Following graduation from the Univ. of Colorado, she worked as a trainer in the WAVES during WW2. After the war, she earned a library degree from Columbia University. For four decades she worked at the Detroit Public Library, where she met her late husband. The couple raised four children, and retired together in 1989.

I was born on a farm in Montezuma County, in the southwestern corner of Colorado, and am old enough to remember the Great Depression and the devastating drought that came with it.

We never considered ourselves poor. We just had no money. Our cash crops—lamb and milk—no longer returned enough cash for their production. The Dolores River dried to a mere trickle, and for two years there wasn’t enough snow and rain to fill the irrigation reservoirs. Feed for our livestock was severely limited. The first two cuttings of alfalfa were poor, and there was no third. In 1932 or ’33 my father sold seven head of young steers and heifers for a total of $45 to pay part of the tuition at Ft. Lewis College, where my older sister was “working her way.”

Nevertheless, my father said that we lived in a land of milk and honey. It was a literal truth, because my grandfather kept bees and had an apple orchard, while we had a barn full of Holstein-Friesian dairy cattle, a half dozen pigs, a hundred or so sheep, a garden, fruit trees and chickens. We grew wheat that we took to the Wark mill and returned with flour, and we made cream that we took to the coop creamery and returned with butter. Eggs were credited to our grocery tab. Grand dad traded honey with truckers from the south for sweet potatoes and sometimes peanuts. Dad dressed out a sheep and received a hundred pounds of sugar from the company store at the McFee sawmill, and we made small trades with our neighbors.

Dad had inherited his parents’ homestead, and the barn he built in 1914 before marrying my mother was as near state-of-the-art as possible on a farm that still lacked electricity and running water. The kitchen probably had had a new range installed since the house was built around 1900, but few other improvements. A heavy cast-aluminum teakettle supplied hot water for cooking and handwashing. There had been a hot water reservoir on the range, but it had cracked when some hired girl let it boil dry some years before.

An epitaph I found in The American Heritage Cookbook describes well our home economy: “Here lies a poor woman, who was always tired. She lived in a house where help was not hired.” Farm women’s work was unbelievably hard, and most cooking was from duty. I particularly remember the huge meals that had to be prepared for the crews who helped with haying and threshing, shearing and sheep dipping. In earlier times, both noon dinner and evening supper were served to these hands. What a relief when only the noon meal was expected.

Bread Baking Day

Many household activities centered on the large wood-burning range. My father would rise at 5 a.m. to start the fire. It took a hot fire to make coffee in the shiny aluminum percolator my mother favored; no boiled coffee for her. On Mondays, the clothes boiler was set on the range. On Tuesday, the irons were heated there for the week’s ironing. I believe Wednesday was bread day.

Mother was proud of the bread she made. I think it was one of the duties she really enjoyed. There were times when she complained about the quality of the flour that the mill supplied, but as far as I remember she never had a baking failure, even though there was no oven thermometer; temperature control was just something she’d learned.

The day before bread was to be baked, the yeast had to be started. Potato water was the chief ingredient. Mother would boil potatoes for the noon meal and save the cooking water. It was added to the “starter” that remained in the half-gallon Mason jar in which the previous yeast had been prepared. To that was added 1/2 cup of sugar, 1 or 2 tablespoons of salt, and enough tepid water to fill the jar, which was then set on top one of the stove’s warming ovens to “work” until the next day.

When bread day arrived, after breakfast Mom filled the bread raiser—a tinned pan as large as a dish pan but rounded on the bottom—with possibly ten pounds of flour. She made a large depression in the center and poured in all of the yeast except a cup, next time’s starter. Then the mixing and kneading process began. After a final kneading on a bread board, she had a large smooth mound of dough. This she returned to the raiser, oiled it with a little melted lard, covered it with a clean cloth and left it to rise in a warm place, I believe the kitchen cabinet next to the range. The dough was punched down twice, then formed into six large loaves, all of them fitted into a large rectangular baking pan for the final rise. Meanwhile, the fire had to be built just right to achieve the proper oven temperature.

Fresh-baked hot bread was a treat, but Father disapproved. “Dough balls in your stomach,” he said, possibly an idea from Sylvester Graham, some of whose teachings seemed to have been part of family lore. Bread was generally white, although sometimes graham bread became a constant, accompanying every meal. “Little bites of meat, big bites of bread,” we were told, but not too sternly. And I think there may have been some references to Fletcher’s teachings.*

* Ed. note: Sylvester W. Graham (1794-1851) of Massachusetts, after whom graham flour is named, was a Presbyterian minister who preached against alcohol, meats, fats, condiments and refined wheat flour. Later admirers included John Harvey Kellogg of Battle Creek, MI. Horace Fletcher (1849-1919) was a San Francisco businessman renowned for claiming nutritional benefits from chewing each bite of food 32 times.
Pulling Together, Keeping Close: Food in Depression-Era Indiana

by Barbara Ruch

Barb Ruch and her daughter Marnie are both CHAA members, and they share a house in Ypsilanti, MI. Barb grew up in rural Indiana, graduating from high school there in 1939. Her late husband Robert made his career in the publishing industry.

I have lived with farmers most of my life. I grew up, surrounded by farms, in the tiny town of Mechanicsburg, Indiana near the northern boundary of Boone County. My father, initially a farmer himself, had a general store and two threshing rigs. Robert, whom I married in 1945, also was raised on an Indiana farm.

It was a very interesting time to grow up. The general store was a hub of the little town, and between that and school and the threshing dinners I got to meet a lot of farming families. Threshing the harvests of wheat and oats was a big, big thing in every farming community. They started at 5:30 in the morning, the machines going “poof, poof, poof” and piling up tall stacks of chaff. It would get very, very hot by the afternoon, and boys would run water out to the crews.

Good food seemed to be a given on farms, since the farmers themselves raised most of what they ate. Their large brown eggs came from their own free-range chickens, and there was no expiration date on the milk and cream from their Guernsey and Jersey cows. Their beef came from their own corn-fed Hereford and Angus cattle, and ham, pork loins and bacon came from their well-fed hogs. The latter meats were placed in smokehouses filled with hickory smoke.

Farmers’ gardens were usually very large and filled with all kinds of beautiful vegetables. These were used fresh all Spring and Summer, and canned or stored in a cellar for the Winter. The storm cellar was an above-ground, sod-covered room, bare except for whitewashed walls and shelves. In the Fall, the farmers carried in bushel-baskets of any vegetable or fruit that would “hold over”: carrots, squash, white and sweet potatoes, cabbages, Brussels sprouts, several kinds of apples, winter pears, pumpkins, as well as home-canned jams, jellies, preserves, pickles and relishes.

Have you ever picked a fresh peach off a tree and eaten it, its juice running down your chin? The farms I remember had many kinds of fruit trees: peach, apple, cherry, pear. At the edge of the farmers’ gardens were strawberry patches, red and black raspberry bushes, grape arbors, and currant and gooseberry bushes.

Meals were not always just family affairs. They might just as easily be church suppers, reunions, threshing dinners, weddings, or dinners served for company at home.

Let me share some of the farming family dishes I remember best from the period 1930-41. Main dishes included fried chicken, Swiss steak, roast beef, chicken and noodles, baked ham, pork loin roast, chicken and biscuits, cold-packed beef, country-fried steak, and meat loaf. Side dishes included scalloped corn, green beans, candied sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes and gravy, baked beans, creamed peas, scalloped cabbage, scalloped tomatoes, Harvard beets, broccoli casserole, and crockneek or acorn squash baked with maple syrup. Salads included apple salad with black walnuts; Bing cherry salad; tomato, cucumber and onion salad; Perfection salad, a molded salad of Knox gelatin flavored with sugar, vinegar and lemon juice, with chopped raw cabbage, celery, carrots and onions; banana and orange salad; slaw; a salad of lime Jell-O® with cottage cheese, crushed pineapple, pears and almonds; and wilted lettuce salad.

Desserts included cakes (burnt-sugar, chocolate fudge, angel food, banana, marble, applesauce, and Lord Baltimore [a frosted vanilla cake with hints of orange or lemon]), pies (apple, chocolate, butterscotch, pumpkin, cherry, lemon, old-fashioned cream, coconut cream), and tapioca pudding. Often, desserts were served with homemade ice cream. This was also a time of the well-filled cookie jar. Saturday night brought popcorn balls, fudge and cold apples from the cellar. Of course, many sweets were seasonal in nature or related to holidays. Halloweeners were served doughnuts, fudge and cider. At Thanksgiving, they served pumpkin pie, mincemeat pie and date pudding. Christmas carolers were asked in and served hot cocoa, sugar cookies and divinity candy.

Farming families lived far apart yet remained very close to one another. Their cooking is a legacy of disciplined, devout and definitely fine people who helped all in the family and their neighbors every day—physically, emotionally and spiritually. George Bernard Shaw said, “The sincerest form of love is the love of food.” Farmers put their priorities in line: they put food at the top of their list. Their food was priceless. It is set in a place dear to my heart.
someone else turned the crank on the top. The crank rotated the steel tank, rubbing it against the ice. A little rock salt was added to the ice to help it melt. There were holes in the wooden barrel that permitted the resulting water to escape.

The turning action pulled the coldness from the ice and transferred it to the eggnog. As the eggnog began to freeze, it became harder to turn the crank, but soon it cranked out the coldest ice cream I have ever tasted. Homemade ice cream will give you a headache in a minute if you eat it too fast.

This ice cream was not as easy to get as that in the freezer at the store. It tasted different, too. During the summer, wild strawberries could be added to the eggnog for added flavor. That was a fine tasting product.

Smaller is Better

There is no good way to pick cukes. The only way is to bend over at the waist, reach down with the hands, snip the little green things from the vine with the thumb, and put them in the bucket. Since the cukes are covered with dumb little pickers, it is wise to wear gloves when harvesting them.

When it is cucumber picking time, the weather is really better for swimming than it is for field work. However, we picked because that was the arrangement at our house. If one wanted to eat, it was required that each one participate in the farming process.

Just as soon as the picking was done, we would dump the cucumbers from the pails into burlap bags and transport them to the pickle station downtown to sell them. The cukes were emptied onto a conveyor system. That belted device jiggled them over the grading grid, a series of ever increasing slots. The most valuable were those tiny ones that dropped through the grid system first and fell into the #1 basket.

Those cucumbers grew after they were picked. I know they did. We would hurry to pick them so they would be small enough to be #1’s when graded. The smallest weighed the least, took up little space in the bag, and brought the highest price per pound. No matter how small they appeared when picked, they seemed bigger by the time we got them to the pickle station to be graded. Most of ours always seemed to be #2’s and #3’s.

A cucumber is called a cucumber when it is growing, picked, or sold. It becomes a pickle after it has been “pickled”, or preserved and flavored in some way. After the cukes had been sold at the station, they went into huge wooden vats of salt brine for pickling. There was a walkway around the top of the vats where anyone interested could watch the pickles in the brine, if they wished to watch such a non-event.

The pickle station is gone now. Even the tracks that carried the trains hauling the pickles away are history. The big vats are only a memory.

But I’ll bet those little cukes are still growing…
A COMMUNITY MOBILIZED: THE LAUDERDALE COUNTY TOMATO FESTIVAL

by Jan Longone

Jan Longone is Curator of American Culinary History at the William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan. She and her husband Dan are proprietors of The Wine and Food Library and founding members of CHAA.

For a number of years, fellow culinary historian Terry Ford had invited Dan and me to attend the Lauderdale County Tomato Festival in Ripley, Tennessee. He promised a lot of good eating and talking, and plenty of Southern hospitality. This July, we took Terry up on his offer and had a truly American food experience.

The drive from Ann Arbor, through the farming country of central Ohio to Cincinnati, then into Kentucky heading west, was an early summer delight. The first night we made a brief detour to Owensboro, KY, on the Ohio River, to partake of its famous contributions to American gastronomy—barbecued mutton and Kentucky Burgoo. We had long wanted to try these specialties at the Moonlite Bar-B-Q Inn, a large barn-of-a-restaurant which serves a buffet of down-home Kentucky dishes. In addition to the barbecued mutton, done in two ways (sliced and chopped), there was barbecued pork, beef, ribs and chicken. Kentucky country ham, barbecued ham and turkey rounded out the meat section. Among the side dishes were green beans with ham, bar-b-q beans, potato salad, cole slaw, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, a broccoli cheese casserole, and at least half a dozen others. Corn bread and biscuits, of course. Several soups, including the renowned burgoo—made with squirrel and game in pioneer times, now with mutton and chicken—which was simply delicious. The dessert tables had pecan, chocolate, buttermilk, peanut butter, coconut and lemon ice box pies; cherry and blackberry cobbler; soft-serve ice cream dispensed from a machine for the children; and many more, seemingly without end. We must and will go back to taste some of the things we missed at this true regional culinary extravaganza.

Wending our way southwest on the Kentucky parkways brought us more beautiful vistas, including some of the hills and lake country of western Kentucky and Tennessee. Finally we arrived in Ripley, the seat of rural Lauderdale County, TN. The Mississippi River gives this county some of the richest soil in the world, yielding excellent crops of cotton, corn, strawberries and vegetables. Its tomatoes are especially renowned, with almost 1200 acres of them planted by some 50 growers.

When we arrived, the 17th annual Tomato Festival was in full swing. A large midway, with food stands, carnival rides, music, a country auction, a talent show, baby-crawling contest, and much more in the way of simple pleasures could be found and tasted. The local bank sponsored a rather remarkable exhibit of tomato-related art, “Consider the Tomato, 2/000,” with 45 very creative artists participating.

One of the best activities was the Tomato Tasting, held in the First Baptist Church Family Life Center. The Center, and the many local people staffing it, were appropriately decked out in tomato décor and ephemera. Five tables provided samples of a couple of dozen dishes showing very creative uses for tomatoes, from green tomato pie to Tennessee cornbread salad. Visitors were asked to vote for their favorite dish; our own votes went to the fried green tomatoes—scrumptious.

‘Scusin’ the Potatoes

Our last day in Ripley featured a bountiful buffet at the offices of the local newspaper, of which Terry is editor. The food was prepared by area cooks, both professional and amateur, using local ingredients. It was followed by some of that good Southern conversation we had been promised. We dined in a room displaying a very old hand press and hundreds of thousands of pieces of type. Glorious!

The buffet included barbecued pulled pork, barbecued ribs, grilled lamb chops, barbecued bologna, an unusual potato salad (made with sour cream), grilled baby vegetables, a fresh gazpacho, ripe red slices of the famed Ripley tomatoes, fried slices of yellow tomatoes, local cantaloupe and watermelon, just-picked blackberries, hand-churned peach and blackberry ice creams, a wondrous Montgomery Pie (a “Pennsylvania Dutch” pie of sugar and molasses creamed with butter, eggs, flour and soured milk), strawberry shortcake, and other items too numerous to mention.

Now to the conversation. With native Tennesseans and other Southerners present, we nearly fomented a miniature civil war by asking whose bourbon, cornbread, barbecue, etc. is best. Among the other guests was a doyen of American cooking, Jeanne Voltz, former food editor of Woman’s Day, the Los Angeles Times and the Miami Herald and author of about a dozen cookbooks. Jeanne’s latest work, The Country Ham Book, was just published by the University of North Carolina Press. You can imagine the spirited discussion on the subject of the “best” country ham!

Our talk then turned to the writing of recipes and cookbooks, and the question of who made the daily decisions about what was to be cooked and eaten in 19th century households. One of the locals told us that in his

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About 30 members of CHAA gathered on a beautiful Sunday afternoon last July for a picnic celebrating the culinary history of the Tuscan region of Italy. It was fun to prepare and sample traditional foods of this heartland of the Etruscans and their successors in Florence, Pisa, Siena, Lucca, Livorno and the surrounding towns and countryside. Carroll and John Thomson have our gratitude for generously offering their home and grounds to make this picnic possible. We also thank our President Margot Michael, whose Spring 1999 study in Florence enabled her to prepare a bibliography important in our preparations, and to team up with Dan Longone in writing the challenging post-repas quiz. A special Tuscania issue of Bon Appétit (May 2000) also proved helpful.

A Rustic Cuisine

With such ingredients as bread, olive oil, cheese, pork, chestnuts and fresh greens, many of our dishes showed how Tuscan cuisine is based on cucina povera, the tradition of peasant cooking. Making cheese, for example, was a way for Italian peasants to preserve precious milk. The Longones brought two types of pecorino, a rich and salty ewe’s-milk cheese and the most important cheese in Tuscany. Since Etruscan and Roman times, pecorino has been curdled with artichoke blossoms and other flowers.

Olives, cultivated by the Etruscans beginning in the mid-600s BCE, ripen wonderfully slowly in the cool Tuscan air and yield an oil of worldwide repute. As cookbook author Giuliano Bugialli of Florence has written, “In Tuscany, the cult of oil and critical refinement about it equals the fanaticism of wine expertise.” Fetta unta (“oily slice”), called bruschetta elsewhere in Italy, is the region’s most popular antipasto. Mila Simmons prepared a version by toasting bread slices, rubbing them with garlic, drizzling with olive oil and topping with diced tomato, basil, balsamic vinegar and goat cheese. Carroll Thomson and Georgann Brown presented us with their respective versions of panzanella, a salad made with pieces of bread tossed with such fresh garden produce as lettuce, cucumber, peppers, onion, tomato, capers and herbs, then dressed with olive oil and vinegar. On traditional tables in Tuscania stale bread is used for this, the pieces often “revived” by being soaked in cool water and then squeezed out.

Jim Deigert and Sindi Keesan baked two versions of autumn chestnut-flour cake. Chestnuts were a staple in medieval Tuscania, especially in times of famine. Workers in the marble quarries of the Garfagnana mountains of coastal Lucca, for instance, made their winter gruel or polenta from chestnut flour, often called farina dolce. The traditional Tuscan castagnaccio is a flat unleavened cake of farina dolce and olive oil, sprinkled with rosemary, nuts and raisins before baking, and served with ricotta, another sheep’s cheese.

The marble workers of Tuscany also left us two celebrated ways to eat preserved pork. Those in Lucca were fond of biroldo, a sausage made of pig’s ears, cartilage, fat and blood, pepper, nutmeg, cloves and coriander. To the north, workers in the quarries of Carrara ate their bread for lunch topped with a slab of the creamy, buttery lardo di Colonnata, named after the village perched above the region, where this type of fatback was cured with brine, garlic, herbs and spices in big marble vats.

As Margot recounted in her Sept. 1999 presentation to us, even in High Middle Age Florence, rustic dishes like castagnaccio, panzanella, and ribollita (a thick “reboiled” winter soup of cabbage, beans and stale bread) were favored preparations inside the small tower kitchens of warring urban nobles.

New Foods from East and West

Many of our picnic dishes, while undeniably Tuscan, made use of Asian ingredients introduced by the Arabs. Margot Michael presented a tonnato of poached chicken with a sauce of tuna, mayonnaise, olive oil, capers, anchovies and lemon juice. Randy Schwartz made a batch of ravioli gnudi, a kind of dumpling of chopped spinach and ricotta lightly rolled in flour and boiled in water. Both lemon and spinach cultivation were introduced to Italy by way of Sicily, soon after the Saracen occupation began there in 827. Knowing that spinach was brought by the Muslims enhances our appreciation of the whimsical name by which ravioli gnudi are known in Florence: strozzapreti (“priest stranglers”) suggests that Christian clergymen were so fond of the spinach ravioli that they choked on them. They are also known as gnocchi del Casentino, for they are a specialty of the Casentino region east of Florence, where spinach and other greens grow wild on the hillsides. Beyond citrus and spinach, rice cultivation in Italy began in Pisa in 1468 by way of Spain, where the Moors had introduced it centuries earlier. Eggplants, black pepper, sugar, coffee and many other foods were also brought by the Arabs.

A second major infusion of new foods, brought from the Western hemisphere after 1492, accounts for the tomatoes that are now standard in panzanella, the potatoes in gnocchi, and the corn in polenta. These foods were already fixtures in Tuscania before the new ingredients arrived. Leslie Stambaugh used chunks of peeled potato to absorb pan juices in her arista e patate arrosto, a pork loin rubbed with olive oil, garlic, rosemary and sage, roasted for hours, sliced and served up with the potatoes. The roast loin got its name when a group of Greek bishops, visiting Florence in 1450, pronounced the dish aristas, or “best”.

Squashes and beans of sorts were also known in Tuscany before 1492, but were soon overshadowed by New World varieties. Eleanor Hoag prepared some wonderful fiori di zucca ripieni, or zucchini blossoms stuffed with a mixture of sautéed breadcrumbs and onion, diced tomato, thyme and garlic, grated cheese and egg, baked along with the baby zukes themselves in a dish drizzled with olive oil. (On the introduction of such New World squashes to Italy, see the two articles by Randy Schwartz in Repast Spring 1999.) Don and Ann Fowler, who once lived in Tuscany for
eight months, brought pasta e fagioli, a form of minestra (the first pasta course) which they made with elbow maccheroni and white beans in a broth rich with onions and garlic. Because of their heavy consumption of beans the Tuscans are nicknamed mangiafagioli (bean eaters)— and that would include Don because he makes a point of trying the pasta e fagioli wherever he sees it in his travels.

The first Italian to describe the New World beans in detail was a botanist of Siena, Pietro Andrea Mattioli. “When eaten, they bloat the stomach but they generate virile seed and encourage sexual intercourse, and even more so if they are eaten with long pepper, sugar and galangal,” Mattioli wrote in the 1500s. “[They should be] cooked in cow’s milk until they split open. They do not create much disturbance to the stomach when they are eaten with mustard greens and cardoons,” a relative of the artichoke. Widespread consumption of cannellini and other beans boosted peasant numbers in Tuscany—not because of their supposed aphrodisiac properties, but because they were a cheap protein-rich food that could be dried and stored. “If you want to know whether beans make tasty food,” wrote the monk Vincenzo Corrado two centuries later in his Il Cuoco Galante (Naples, 1781), the first Italian cookbook with bean recipes, “you should ask the people of Florence, since more than all others they make great use of them at all times and particularly the dried white type.”

The Grand Synthesis

Urban trade and contact with Asia and America helped to undermine Italian feudalism, whose cuisine had reflected the stability and self-sufficiency of landed estates. Modern Tuscan cuisine has instead been shaped by the capitalists, the class that stepped forward to control industrial production, overseas holdings, and national culture. In Florence this was signaled by the rise of the Medici family, whose wealth was based on the spice trade and who were great patrons of the Renaissance. Their intermarriage with French nobility (1533) hastened the intermixture of Florentine, Genoese, Pиемonte and French culture, including culinary techniques displayed at grand feasts. Duck (or capon) in orange sauce is a typical Medici favorite that became popular in France. In the other direction ragù, a slow-simmered French stew, became in Bologna and Florence a new kind of sauce for pasta: ragù.

Doris Miller and her guest made us a ragù out of fresh veal and pork sausage links, browned in olive oil with garlic and odori (similar to mirepoix) and then simmered in broth and red wine along with tomatoes, porcini and herbs. This ragù was served atop penne and sprinkled with freshly grated grano padano, a hard, granular cheese of cow’s milk from the Pô valley. Over the centuries, it has become common in Italy to mince (or even grind) stew-beef more and more finely, resulting in a ragù described as la ghiaiosa (“pebbly”). A hand-cranked screw press to extrude maccheroni, penne and other tubular pasta became available in Italy in the 1600s, and large-scale commercial production arose in the 1800s.

Tuscany adopted the popular dessert panna cotta, literally “cooked cream,” from the dairy region of Piemonte. It is an eggless vanilla custard made by dissolving gelatin and sugar into simmered heavy cream. Julie Lewis made us a version topped with strawberry sauce and pignoli (pine nuts). The sauce is laced with Vin Santo (“holy wine”), a spicy, usually quite sweet dessert wine of Tuscany made from Trebbiano, Malvasia and other white grapes. In traditional small-scale production of Vin Santo, sweetness is concentrated by first partially air-drying the grapes in an attic, where they are spread out on straw mats or hung from rafters. The pressed juice is then aged in the attic for 3-4 years in small sealed casks, each with a layer of air at the top to produce, by oxidation, a rich amber color. Pisa is Europe’s leading producer of pignoli, many of which are made into pesto, a Tuscan favorite adopted from Genoa but incorporating the local pecorino cheese.

THE PICKLE DUMP

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When a vat was full, a man at the top raised his hand to halt the operation. We watched in fascination as the Britton Fire truck unwound its hoses and began spraying into the vat, which was repeatedly filled and drained. One last fill with clean water, then salt was added “to get rid of the beasties” wended one of the workmen in our direction. The heady, musky smell of ripe cucumbers surrounded us, intoxicating our senses.

We kids watched from our position near the railroad tracks. Despite pleadings, we were never allowed to climb up on top to see the work directly. Nor were we ever privy to the secrets of the pickling process itself: all our best spy efforts were cut short by a firm but not unkind “that’s enough for you girls today. Best you all head for home now.” Of course, tomato season would be close at hand, the occasion for another parade as bushels of warm, red tomatoes were loaded onto rail cars and shipped to the Campbell company.

We felt proud that tomatoes and cucumbers from Britton might end up in a can of Campbell’s soup or a jar of Vlasic pickles. And even after all these years, whenever I smell baskets of these farm vegetables warmed by the summer sun, my thoughts drift back to those days in Britton. It was a mysterious and magical time, whose memories linger on.

TOMATO FESTIVAL

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grandmother’s kitchen, one of the “help” would start each day by asking: “Scusin’ the potatoes, what shall I cook today?” That is, excusing, or except for, the potatoes, which were served every day, what else should be prepared?

There was more culinary talk and tasting. Terry certainly fulfilled his promise of good food, stimulating conversation and fine Southern hospitality.

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Ed. note: Terry Ford of Ripley, TN is a founding member of the Southern Foodways Alliance (SFA), a recently formed institute of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture with headquarters at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS. The mission of the SFA is to “celebrate, preserve, promote, and nurture the traditional and developing diverse food culture of the American South. The SFA sees food as vital in itself, and as a clear, accessible lens through which infinite aspects of Southern culture may be viewed and embraced.” The SFA has undertaken an ambitious program of oral history collection, archival research, and annual Southern Foodways Symposia.
Jan. 21
Shirley Tong Parola
(Co-author, *Remembering Diamond Head, Remembering Hawai‘i*)
“The Diversity of Hawaiian Food”

Feb. 18
Linda and Fred Griffith
(Co-authors, *Garlic Garlic Garlic*)
“Our Passion for the Stinking Rose”

Mar. 18
Dave Boutette
(Marketing Manager, Whole Foods Market)
“Exotic Produce”

Apr. 15 (tentative date)
Ari Weinzweig
(Founding partner, Zingerman’s Delicatessen)
“Life on the Wild Side: The Story of Wild Rice in North America”