

News from Nan

NAN'S WRITINGS

NAN'S REMINISCENCES: FOODS

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This post is part of a series of reminiscences that Nan (born 1906) wrote about her childhood in Minden City, Michigan. Most of the pieces were written sometime between 1990 and 1995.

This post talks about the kind of foods eaten in the Riedel family home and that of Nan's maternal grandmother, Louise Dorsch Schreiter.

Old-time natural foods



Louise (Luise) Dorsch Schreiter

Our ancestor, my mother's mother (Friederike Luise "Louise" Dorsch Schreiter) was an herbalist. And so some of the "weeds" were food for the pioneers, and probably contributed to the excellent physique of the family line.

Mother used to talk about the kettles of greens: dandelion greens, lamb's quarters, and "pig-weed" that were a standard part of their diet. We ate those, too, though not with joy at the time, I recall. The dandelion greens were mashed, and looked most unfortunately like "cow pies" — although I remember the good flavor imported to them by "browned flour."

I associate this with Grandma Schreiter. One just stirred the flour in the frying pan — dry, but hot — and kept stirring, so that it turned brown, but not black! This was stirred into the “green mush” to thicken and flavor it. That was how we got our “roughage” — now called fiber.

We also got fiber from fresh, raw fruit, notably apples, which were available to us from early fall through the winter. While they were firm and hard we ate them as snacks. When they began to soften, they became applesauce, which was as common a diet staple as potatoes or eggs. I can't imagine how we happened not to eat violets. There were always violets, in the yard and in the woods. Both the flowers and the leaves are edible.



*Nan with her mother, Anna Schreiter Riedel, in Anna's garden
(about 1955)*

If one had a garden, the “thinnings” made some of the earliest treats of the season. Mother made a delicious cream soup with perhaps the first tiny lettuce leaves and baby carrots out of the rows, pulled to make room for the carrots to grow. I read recently that one could eat the tiny bean plants (peas, too?) before the pods begin to appear.

I don't think we had salad often (that is, the fancy type). But we had leaf lettuce from the first gardening days of spring, fixed “German style.” The leaves were washed and drained and put in a bowl. A little butter was melted: enough to flavor, but not to make greasy. Sugar and salt to taste were sprinkled on, and then a small spoonful of vinegar was sprinkled on and stirred in with the butter. Individualized salads, as opposed to the “bowl salads” began to be on family tables in about the 1920s, I think. I remember a pineapple and banana concoction, put together to resemble a candlestick. Still in the bowl, but popular and exciting, was Waldorf salad: chopped apples, a bit of onion, celery, and raisins. The dressing was homemade “boiled” dressing.

Homemade mayonnaise came in with kitchen machinery. There was a part with the mixer for dropping the oil evenly into the mix. I don't remember when dressings became available in the stores — perhaps about the same time. For church dinners and big groups coleslaw was the favorite, probably because it didn't wilt like lettuce nor get soft like fruit mixes. Plain celery and carrot sticks were always reliable as a crisp bite. Pickles used to provide that, too, especially the fancy ones like "icicle" or "7-day" varieties. The harder and crisper they are in the finished product, the longer their preparation time. Since pickles were the first salads, really, the pioneer ladies had shelves of different varieties in their cellars, as well as crocks of dill pickles. End-of-season or end-of-crop foods tended to become pickled: spiced pears and watermelon rind and peaches.

Like the old story that they used all of the pig but the squeal, it is true that the housewife used everything to the last morsel. My mother made a syrup of the peach parings that I liked better than anything, but my sister Sal strenuously objected to it as "made from garbage!" On pancakes or potato pancakes it was a very special treat. Mother probably could have made money as an innovator: fruit syrups came late to the marketplace. Grass stems made good munching. The grass needs to be approaching blooming season and must be pulled just right to separate from the enclosing sheath.

There was a wild fruit we called "ground cherry" — the fruit a cherry-like berry enclosed in a green ribbed sheath. The fruit fell on the ground and was ripened by the sun, which caused the sheath to dry off. When the exposed fruit was golden and translucent, it was delectable. Unripe, it tasted terrible! This was a treat for the patient, knowing ones. You had to wait for maturity and know when the right moment had come! Left un-garnered, the fruit reseeded next year's crop.

A Sunday tradition



Nan and her mother, engaged in a Sunday tradition

Yesterday the Johnsons and I were visiting the Jobses for day-after-Thanksgiving leftovers, and a chance to take note of the up-coming December birthdays in which our families specialize. The college-age cousins had a chance to renew acquaintance, and since Paul and Dorothy were also there, we spoke of

old times and old things. I had taken Andi an old rounded-end table knife of silver-plate Rogers silver-ware that she had once said would make a good spreader. It is a tad-end remnant of a set Mother used to have, of no value intrinsically, certainly, but loved as a memory of life in my parents' home.

We were talking about what is the best way to pass along one's belongings, which may look like a lot of old junk or a house bulging with treasure, according to the eye of the beholder. And Dorothy mentioned that my mother gave her a set of old glasses — four or six perhaps. They might have been a wedding present. I know they had been in the dining-room cupboard for as long as I can remember. They were not especially fine glass but were appealing because of the forget-me-nots that decorated each tiny lily-shaped cup of the wee stemmed goblets.



Forget-me-not wine glasses

My brother Paul remarked that they had probably never had anything in them but grape juice — remembering, no doubt, that my mother was sternly opposed to drinking. But I am five years older than he, and I can correct that impression he had of tee-totaling at Mother's house. It was not the drink she opposed, it was the abuse of it.

The little glasses are really a wonderful symbol of a different kind of hospitality. There was nothing of luxury in our house, for it was a home that had been built up with economy and care on an always limited income and with a careful eye to making due provision for necessities first. It had to be that way. But life was lived with courtesy and thoughtfulness in that community of families, most of them headed by parents who had had only the rudiments of education. Even the "professor" [the high school teacher?] had probably had no more training for his job than a few months at an educational institute.

The adults were usually not on a first-name basis with close neighbors and friends. I suppose my mother and one of the longest-lasting of the neighborhood ladies rarely called each other "Kate" and "Anna" to their dying day. It was always "Mrs. Moore" and "Mrs. Riedel."

The snapshot I like best of me with my mother [see above] was probably taken as we set out for a Sunday afternoon “call.” That would have been about 1910, and the ladies even had calling cards with their names on them to leave after the visit. It was a ceremonial visit — as opposed to a workday drop-in for the purpose of sharing garden largesse or to offer, or bring, help in case of illness or accident or death in the family. On a ceremonial call one would be entertained in the parlor, if there was one, and the little glasses would be brought in with real wine — home-made dandelion, probably, in our house, though it might be elderberry or something else elsewhere. With it might be served a very thin slice of fruit cake. It had nothing to do with hunger or thirst — it was pure ceremony. The little table that held it would be covered with a white linen cloth, beautifully “done-up,” and probably embroidered or lace-edged with the hostess’s own handiwork — or that of one of her relatives or friends. It was a nice, dignified, neighborly rite.

I had completely forgotten about the little forget-me-not glasses, but I am pleased to have them back in my memory. It is a pleasant winter afternoon, and in my mind’s eye, once more I am wearing a “Sunday dress” and in “good” shoes, and perhaps even carrying gloves or a muff, and walking out in the town with my mother, snow crunching under foot, going to call on a neighbor, getting to sit in the “good room,” and listening to a ladylike exchange of town news. It was nice!

On the first trip I took to Europe [1934], in a little German town where the bus made a short stop, I found the male counterpart of the little forget-me-not glasses and bought them as a take-home gift for my father. They were little green glasses in a carrier, I suppose intended for a few sips of “schnapps” to match the ladies’ wine. My father also always had his few bottles of liquid hospitality at hand for visitors. This was almost entirely local. Everybody in our small town lived within walking distance of everybody else. Even after there began to be a few cars, they would all be up on blocks for the winter months.

How very different it all was!

Favorite family recipes

This section contains a few favorite family recipes. I [Anna] copied most of them from my mother’s 3×5 recipe cards, but some originated further back in the family or from another source, which is indicated, if known.

Some of the most popular recipes have multiple versions. For example, I have 4 versions of the Stollen recipe and 5 versions of Springerles. In the case of Stollen, Mother labeled one as THE ONE, so I’ve chosen that one to share.

Potato dumplings (Grüne Klösse)

Dumplings are a specialty of the German states of Saxony and Thuringia. This version of the recipe uses only boiled potatoes, but some versions call for half boiled and half raw potatoes (“green” in the German

name means “raw”), and some use only raw potatoes. Serves 3.

2 cups ground boiled potatoes

1 cup flour

1 egg

1-1/2 tablespoons bread crumbs 1-1/2 tablespoons butter, melted Salt

The dumplings can be filled with prune plums or plum jam.

Combine potato with flour and egg. Season. Form long thin rolls on a floured board. Cut each roll into small dumplings. Cook for 5 minutes in boiling water in a large kettle. Remove with a colander spoon onto a warmed serving platter. Add bread crumbs to butter and fry for a few minutes, stirring (or use fried bacon crumbs and drippings). Pour over dumplings.

Duck and “greenies”

One dish that always brought all my brothers running was “duck and greenies.” The “greenies” were Grüne Klöss’, or “green dumplings.” The “green” ones are made of raw potatoes, grated, drained, shaped (with croutons in the center) and steamed.

Dorothy Slack Riedel, who learned how to make them and deserves a badge for her success in heritage foods, tell me that the potatoes need to be just right for success. Idaho bakers are too dry and fall apart in the kettle. Dad used to try to get potatoes from Mr. Obee, who farmed swampy land west of Minden.

While the hard work of grating has been going on, the duck has been in the oven, in pieces, browning, with just enough water to make liquid for gravy. During the last hour, a good layer of onions, cut in slices, has blanketed the duck, and mouths have been watering. The onion gravy over the “gum balls” is what gives the delectable flavor. How many onions? A good thick layer, to cook to translucence. If you haven’t a duck to roast, a chicken makes a good second-best.

Mashed potatoes are a good accompaniment, or other vegetables. Carrots and rutabagas mashed together make a good — and pretty — vegetable. Cranberry sauce or baked squash are also good. Mother’s homemade rolls are delicious, and cole slaw or pickled beets. Corn on the cob with butter would make a feast! Cucumber in sour cream is a seasonal treat. Medium or small cucumbers are tender and tasty. Peel the cucumbers and slice thinly. Sprinkle with salt and let stand. Squeeze them dry and put in a bowl. Add a small spoonful of vinegar and a bit of sugar and pepper. Add a dollop of commercial sour cream or soured cream. Mix together and eat. Ummm. Windmill cookies [a Dutch specialty] would make a good dessert, and some homemade applesauce would go well in there somewhere, as would cottage cheese.

Aunt Glad’s brown bread

This recipe is from Gladys Kelley Riedel [wife of Nan's brother Ray].

Makes one loaf of bread.

1/3 cup molasses

1/3 cup sugar

1-1/3 cup buttermilk or sour milk

1 teaspoon salt

3/4 cup white flour and 1-1/2 cup graham flour OR 1 cup white flour and 1-1/4 cup wheat flour 1/2 cup raisins

1/2 cup chopped nuts

1 teaspoon soda (dissolved in a little of the milk)

Mix the molasses, sugar, milk, and salt. Add the flour next, and then the raisins and nuts. Add the soda last. Turn quickly into a greased bread pan. Let stand quietly for 1/2 hour and then bake at 350 degrees for 35 minutes.

Anna Schreiter Riedel's white cookies

This is Anna Schreiter Riedel's recipe passed down from Selma (Sal) Riedel Bostwick.

1-1/2 cups sugar

1 cup shortening

1 cup sour milk or buttermilk

2 eggs

1 teaspoon soda

1 teaspoon baking powder

3-1/2 to 4 cups flour (enough to roll) 1 teaspoon nutmeg

1/2 teaspoon salt

raisins

Sprinkle tops with sugar. Bake at 375 degrees for 10 minutes, or until lightly browned.

Springerles

Anise-flavored German Christmas cookies. Makes 3 large cookie sheets.

This recipe is a combination of the recipes of Anna Schreiter Riedel and Selma (Sal) Riedel Bostwick. It comes out soft enough for instant eating.

6 eggs, beaten till light
1 pound powdered sugar, added gradually 2 cups granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar

Beat together until the mixture is smooth and shiny — almost as thick as whipped cream, or better, taffy.

1/2 teaspoon anise oil, OR 2 teaspoons anise extract
4-1/2 cups unsifted or presifted flour, or enough to make it workable anise seeds

Flour the board generously. If the dough sticks, add flour and roll out again. Roll out the dough with a regular rolling pin, and then roll the designs into the cookies with a springerle pin. Save all scraps till end so dough gets done over only once. Grease cookie sheets and sprinkle with anise seeds. Cut the individual cookies apart, and put on the cookie sheets. Let sit 6-8 hours or overnight (to let the design dry into the cookie.). Bake at 325 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes, or until lightly browned.

Stollen

Sweet bread baked at Christmastime.

Apparently Mother [Nan] thought this was the best version from among the several used by various members of the family.

1 cup milk
4 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
2 yeast cakes or packages
1 cup flour
2 eggs, well beaten
2/3 cup melted butter
1 cup raisins or currants
1/2 cup candied cherries, cut up, or a mixture of cherries and citron 2 tablespoons orange peel pieces
2 tablespoons lemon rind (grated)
4 additional cups of flour
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 cup sliced almonds (to mix with fruit or sprinkle on top)

Scald the milk and add sugar and salt. Cool to lukewarm and add the yeast cakes or packages dissolved in tepid water or a little of the liquid. Mix thoroughly and add 1 cup of flour.

Stir till smooth. Cover and set in a warm place (80 degrees) till double in bulk; then add eggs, butter, fruit, and the additional 4 cups of flour sifted with nutmeg and cinnamon. Knead till dough is smooth. Return to bowl and let rise till again double in bulk.

Divide dough into 2 parts. Roll each part lightly to about 3/4 inch thickness and fold over as you would an omelet. Place on well-greased cookie sheet; let rise about 2 hours.

Just before putting loaves into the oven to bake, sprinkle tops with sliced almonds. Bake at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes.

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