



COVERED DISH SUPPERS

Of all the revered Cape Cod traditions -- very few evoke the memories of 'The Covered Dish Supper'. Every church or club in town, over the years, turned these suppers into an art form. There was great competition amongst the ladies of the community to one-up their friends and neighbors with a new delectable dish. Then there were others who, year after endless year arrived with the very same offering with never a grain of salt difference in their creation. The accolades they received the first time they presented "The Creamed Onions" or "The Potato Salad" was enough to keep them in Cuisine Heaven forever. In every club the supper committee chairman would be prepared to say, "Of course, Carrie, we can count on your creamed onions." This was after six or seven consecutive years of Carrie saying, "Why don't you put me down for creamed onions. They always go good with a meal."

I speak from experience at the West Harwich First Baptist Church suppers where my grandmother, Nora Snow Murray, presided over the kitchen and dispensed coffee by the gallon and hot rolls and butter by the gross to go with the myriad of dishes presented by the ladies of the church. The ticket for these epicurean delights cost 50¢, as I remember, and you could eat as much as you wished, or could hold, whichever came first. However, at West Harwich/Dennis Port Baptist one of the esteemed matrons and pillar of society always arrived with a black Boston Bag in hand. After being seated she would place the bag on her lap and, as the dishes were passed around the table, she would put a portion on her plate and another portion in the bag saying, "Just taking a little something home for Lillian". At the end of the meal she could hardly carry the bag, and it is entirely possible that Lillian never saw any of the covered dish supper. The good ladies of the church persevered year after year and raised money for many charities at 50¢ a ticket -- and no one ever went away hungry.

At the Community Club which later became the Village Improvement Club in Dennis Port the ladies put on covered dish suppers to raise money for community improvements. One of the more notable suppers they provided was for the local men of the 211th Coast Artillery--Massachusetts National Guard when they were activated and deployed to Camp Hulen, Texas from Camp Edwards in 1940. The VIC ladies pulled out all the stops and gave the boys a grand send off with loads of home cooking and a variety show to tell them how much they were admired and would be missed. Many 211th veterans can tell you today how much they appreciated their home town giving them such a wonderful party as they went away into World War II.

In North Dennis the Chatterbox Club held their suppers at Carleton Hall. This club filled the social calendars of many in the village before the days of television. Among the early members were: Allie Nickerson, Anna McDowell, Muriel Hallet, Ethel Whittemore, Esther Howes, Patia Davidson, Lu Hall, Ida Howes, Polly Ellis, and Ina B. Howes, mothers and grandmothers to some of our members. Each member was required to bring a main dish, a dessert, and her hungry family. Margaret "Mig" Walker Maher remembers her four year old son, Brian, whose interest was 99% on the dessert Mig had brought. All during the meal he had $\frac{1}{2}$ an eye on his plate and $1\frac{1}{2}$ on the dessert table. Upon noting that Selectman Earl Davidson had strolled up to the dessert table and was paying attention to Migs dessert Brian slipped out of his seat, grabbed that dessert, and brought it back to the table with Earl hot on his heels. It evidently was Brians favorite and he didn't think anyone else should be privy to "his" dessert. I guess they worked out a deal so Earl could at least have a taste.

Also in North Dennis was another group of friends and neighbors who met periodically at each other's homes for covered dish supper. Group member and gourmet specialist Earl "Chippie" Whittemore named his dining companions "The Gut Club", no doubt because the food was so good! After the tables were cleared the group worked off the excess calories playing bridge--primarily the women--or Chinese Checkers with fierce competition between the gentlemen.

Another premier site for covered dish offerings was Totten Hall (now Liberty Hall) in South Dennis where the venerable Ladies Union Circle of the South Dennis Congregational Church took second place to no one in pleasing the palates of their neighbors. In 1937 the ladies of the Circle produced a cook book which included many of their favorite covered dishes. Some of the old time favorites included: Stifled Eels, Bubble and Squeak, Punkhorn Stifel or Potato Bargain, Blueberry Duff, Cranberry Slump, Mrs. Sarah Wheldon's Fruit Cake (which contained two wine glasses of wine and two wine glasses of brandy--in a church cook book!), and Kedgeree. Included, of course, were "receets" for Clam Chowder, Salt Cod, Clam Pie, and Chicken Pie. Abbie Baker's recipe for Quahaug Chowder reads: "Quahaug chowder is made exactly like clam chowder." As expected, there is a recipe for that old Cape Cod staple--Baked beans, plus a recipe for Baked Bean Soup--with the sub title, "Monday night's supper from Saturday night's beans". DHS Charter Member Eleanor (Mrs. Richard) Hall is the only 1937 Circle member still with us. One of the items of interest included in the book was that Mrs. Sarah Nickerson had been the Union Circle Treasurer for 45 years.

Each dish arrived with the owners name printed on a strip of adhesive tape on the bottom of the dish. Take that special heirloom you inherited from Aunt Emma down from the shelf and see if her name is on it. If so, your dish was a featured attraction at a Covered Dish Supper!

CALENDAR

Apr. 10 7:30 P.M. DHS Board meets with the Reyleks.
Apr. 26 Arbor Day. Plant a tree!
Apr, 28 2:00 P.M. The Old Cape Codger--Ben Thacher--will entertain us at West Dennis Community Center.

ONE HORSEPOWER (Old Style)

Our favorite guest writer, Josh Crowell, is back with us this month to ask an historical question:

This time of year many people are, and many more should be, preparing their power lawn mowers for the summer's chores. Change the oil, put in a new air filter, check the spark plug and, above (or below) all, sharpen or replace the blade.

Does anyone else remember the horse-drawn lawn mower that was used on the Village Improvement Society's properties? Does anyone else remember the "horse shed" that occupied a space southerly of the Carleton Hall kitchen, facing Old Bass River Road until 1954? My memory says that the mower in question was stored in that shed when it was torn down in 1954 to make room for Linwood Robbins to dig a cellar and move Carleton Hall 100 feet southerly in 1955.

This mower was of the reel type, probably had 48" to 60" blades and 16" to 20" metal wheels. It had a pair of shafts and a pressed steel seat for the operator. This machine was first owned by the Bleak House for use on it's Seaside Avenue lawns, probably with Alvin Greenleaf on the driver's seat. Bleak House undoubtedly upgraded to an early gasoline powered mower which was a very awkward machine indeed. The generous Howes sisters that owned the Bleak House gave the horse-drawn lawn mower to the Village Improvement Society for it's use. At this time Charlie Hallett became the operator and whatever horse he owned became it's source of power. Oh, yes, the horse wore leather "bog shoes" while mowing to prevent damage to the tender lawn grass. Does anyone know what happened to this quaint antique when the horse shed was cleaned out and torn down? JC

And you thought riding lawn mowers were a modern invention! This only occurred forty-two years ago, so someone out there should know the answer to his question. Do let us know what happened to this unique piece of Dennis history. Thanks, Josh!

"WHAY DO ALL OLD HOUSES HAVE BARNs..."

...even though the people were not farmers?" DHS member John Griffin asked ye olde that question recently. The answer is easy--to hold all their "stuff"--any everyone had a lot of it. Old time Cape Codders never threw anything away if it was outdated, or even broken, because somewhere down the road they might have a need for it--in whole or in part. This was before the days of disposables and yard sales and the only accepted way to get rid of it was to put it in the loft or over in the back corner of the barn. Utilitarian things like ladders, shovels, scythes for cutting the grass around the house, and all other tools would be in the barn. Only a few well-to-do people hired someone to do yard chores. Almost everyone, even sea captains, kept a few chickens, grew a vegetable garden, had some fruit trees, a grape arbor, and a root cellar under the barn. Guess who did most of the work in that household! Mother would bear the brunt of it quite often with a large family of children to help her. A number of families had a horse and buggy and a sleigh in the barn and a few people kept a cow just for their own family even if they were in business. The list could go on and on including hay and grain bought from a neighbor or the grain store for the horse, cow, or chickens.

So, John, I guess we have to say it was just a different lifestyle that accounted for everyone having a barn. Perhaps in the next century they will wonder why all of our houses have a garage!

THE OLD CAPE CODGER

Save Sunday afternoon, April 28, for a special treat. Dennis' poet laureate, Bicentennial Town Crier, and native son, Ben Thacher, will entertain us at the West Dennis Community Center from 2-4 P.M. With Ben you never know what he will say, sing, or do, but it is always humorous. Come, bring some friends, and be prepared to have a good time. Refreshments will be served by the DHS Board.

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