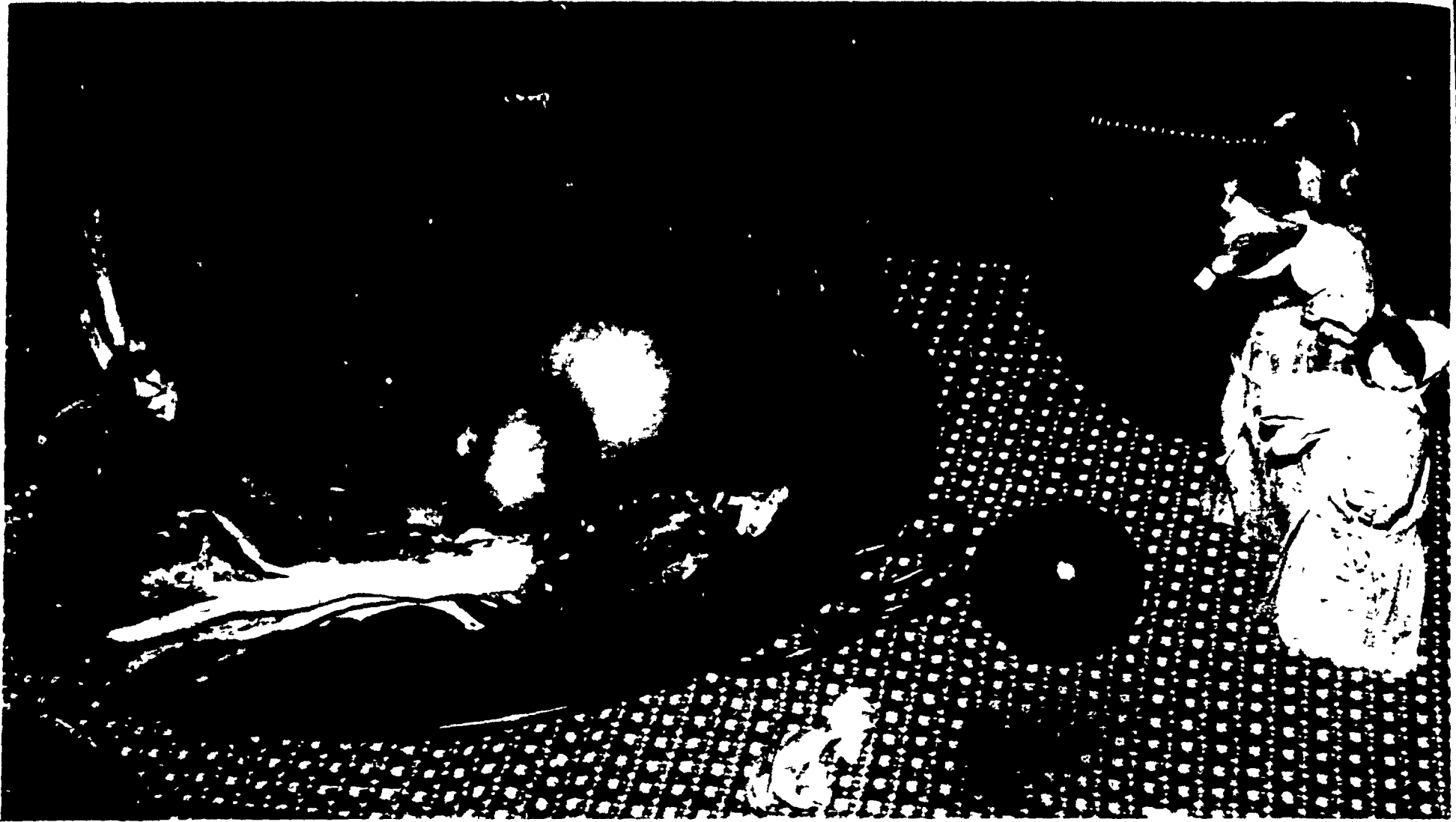


*Edible history lesson.***Colonial foods recall bicentennial days**

Colonists were introduced to pumpkins and squash by the Indians. These foods constituted most of the staple diet along with corn and fish.

By Sally Bair
Farm Feature Writer

As we begin to celebrate our nation's 200th birthday, do you find yourself yearning to return to those days when life seemed simpler? Perhaps so, but according to Mrs. Alletta Schadler, extension home economist in Lebanon County, the life of a colonial homemaker was not so simple.

Consider doing all of your cooking over an open fireplace in limited space in a room which doubled as living room, family room, den and sometimes bedroom.

Or consider doing the laundry. As Letie said, "When the colonial housewife wanted to wash, she had to butcher to get fat to make soap. And to make soap she needed lye which was made from wood ashes and had to be saved in advance." Perhaps this was not an exact sequence of events, but certain aspects of life today are indeed easier than the life of the colonial homemaker.

In a program entitled "Colonial Foods - an edible history lesson" Letie shared with her audience fascinating tidbits of history which offered real insights into the preparation of food by the colonial homemaker.

According to Letie, when the Pilgrims first arrived in the 1600's they found that Indians all across the country shared basically the same kind of diet - squash, beans and corn.

Letie pointed out that Indians really practiced an intensive form of agriculture, and were truly farmers as well as hunters. However, the women did the farming. They were also important in the governing of the tribe, because it was the women who selected the council who ruled their lives.

As for planting, the corn was planted on hills, with about four kernels of corn and fish for fertilizer. Beans were planted so they could grow up the cornstalks and squash were planted between the hills.

One problem which developed from such intensive cultivation was that the soil nutrients were rapidly depleted, but when it was no longer productive the Indians simply moved their village.

In addition to the staples of beans, squash and corn, there were 34 native berries and fruits harvested by the Indians, including such things as pigweed and dandelion.

Pumpkin, sweet potatoes and cranberries were among the native fruits and vegetables found in this land. Cranberries were once known as bounceberries, Letie related, because the ripe ones bounce. Try it!

Vegetables such as carrots, peas, radishes, turnips, cabbage, cauliflower, onions, beets and lettuce were introduced by the English between 1610 and 1634. Berries and melons were native, but apples, pears and quince were all imported.

Bees, surprisingly, were also brought over by the English, Letie said.

But what was it like in the kitchen in those early days of our nation?

Letie stressed that cooking over the fireplace in the multi-purpose room was not an easy matter. She said, "It was a hot job and required lots of attention." Starting the fire was the first difficult problem since matches were not common. So the housewife had the burden of keeping the fire going continuously.

The main fire in the fireplace was not used for cooking, Letie said. In most cases, coals were pulled from the main fire, and kettles or frying pans with legs were placed over them for cooking. The colonists used a form of Dutch oven, which was actually an iron kettle with a lid. Coals were placed under the kettle and on top of the lid to facilitate cooking.

There were large supports used to suspend kettles over the fire, but Letie said these could be dangerous. Before foundries came into existence, the supports were wooden and there was always the danger of the wood catching on fire and dropping the evening meal into the hot fire. And remember, there was no fast food restaurant down the cobblestone road!

Utensils too were rather a different matter. Forks did not come into common usage until the mid 1800's, according to Letie, and everyone ate with spoons and knives. The point of the knife was used to spear things, and then the colonists simply ate right off the point of the knife.

There were, Letie reminded her audience, two distinct societies at that time. There were the very wealthy, who lived in Philadelphia, Boston, Williamsburg and Jamestown, and the average settler family. The wealthy

Homestead Notes

ate lavishly, with great feasts and an infinite variety of food and of course were served on fine dishes.

The average family however probably owned no more than one pewter plate. And when they left their home country to settle here they brought only essential tools - iron kettles and utensils, not fine dishes. So for eating, the usual vessel was a "wooden trench" which was really a rectangular hollowed-out board. Two persons normally shared this vessel, and ate the meal from the hollowed out portion, turning it over for dessert.

But what the housewife use for cooking? There were many staples in the colonial kitchen. Cornmeal and flour played a large part in the food preparation. Salt was expensive, but was considered a necessity so colonists either bought it or traded for it.

Spices were extremely important in the kitchen, primarily because there was no way to preserve food. So they often disguised off-flavors in food. Nutmeg, mace, pepper, cloves, ginger and cinnamon were common spices. Herbs and flowers were also used extensively in cooking, Letie said.

Sweetening agents were considered important, and such things as maple syrup, molasses, honey and sorghum were used. "White sugar was quite a delicacy," Letie explained. It was sold in cone shape and the colonial housewife bought just the amount she could afford. The blue wrapper in which it came was often cooked and the indigo used for dye by the frugal housewife. The sugar had to be ground or grated before it could be used. Indians harvested maple syrup, according to Letie, and molasses

was very inexpensive since it was imported for the distillation of rum.

Yeast was another kitchen staple but not in the nice, pre-measured form we know today. Wild yeast, brewer's yeast, and sour milk were used extensively. Saleratus and pearlash were chemicals used in place of baking powder and baking soda. But they were alkaline and very inexact and undependable. Accordingly, often there was no leavening used in colonial recipes.

Gelatin, another staple, was derived from calves feet or isinglass. "The ladies loved fancy molded desserts," Letie said, "but lots of spices were needed to kill the taste of the gelatin agent."

Another popular item with the colonial housewife was steamed or boiled puddings. "They were very popular," Letie said, "because baking was a real chore." Frequently the mixtures were put in a "pudding sack" which was made wet and floured and then put in a colander in water.

Letie reminded her audience frequently that "cooking in those days was not all that fussy."

Meat did not play nearly the large part in the colonial diet we have come to expect today. Letie said, "They ate lots of fresh meat when they butchered." About the only safe method of preservation was smoking meat. There was no refrigeration, although in some parts of the colonies the weather was sufficiently cold for freezing food at least part of the year.

Another problem with the meat supply is that most animals served a purpose other than providing meat for the table. The beef were raised to work and to provide milk to make cheese. They were also used for hides, Letie said, and their last use was for food. That meant the meat was very old and very tough before it reached the table.

Sheep was raised primarily for wool, so mutton was the only dish prepared from that animal, Letie said.

Chickens were kept mainly to provide eggs and when they stopped laying they became food for the table. Of course, a hen that wasn't laying any longer was good only for stewing.

Pigs were the one animal used primarily for meat, but they served some very important other functions in the colonial household. They provided fat for cooking and for soap making and also sausage casings.

What the colonists did have in abundance was game and fish. The Indians taught the early settlers how to fish and they even had to teach them to hunt since most of the settlers were of peasant stock and only the wealthy could hunt in Europe. Turkeys were quickly overharvested, Letie said, and by 1700 there were noticeably fewer wild turkeys.

Baking in the colonial home, Letie said, was probably done no more than once a week. One reason is that baking was a rather ponderous task. A beehive oven was used, and a fire was built early to heat up the oven. When the stones or bricks were hot the ashes and fire were swept out and the bread was put in. If sufficient heat was left after the essential baking, sometimes cookies would be baked. Sometimes the edges of the doors were sealed with mud to keep the heat in longer, Letie said.