

BY SUZANNE KEENE

STRASBURG — For many, the words "county fair" mean rows of fruits and vegetables in shining canning jars, intricate crafts sewn with loving hands, and farm animals parading around a show ring. But for culinary connoisseurs, county fairs mean generous servings of the best homemade food available.

The women who prepare that delicious food spend many hours in a hot kitchen, cooking and stewing until all menu selections are prepared to perfection. Margaret Lefever and Edna Beiler, the two women who are primarily responsible for cooking the corn soup, chicken pot pie and other menu items at the West Lampeter Fair, say preparing food for a fair is a lot of hard work, but quickly add that it's a lot of fun too.

Margaret and Edna split the cooking responsibility for the three-day event, with Margaret preparing the lunches and Edna in charge of suppers.

While they carry much of the responsibility for seeing that everything gets done on time, they

do not work alone. Many people from the community offer their time and talents to make the fair food a success.

"It's a community effort," Margaret said. Many senior citizens donate a few hours to the project, helping to pick off chicken, grate cabbage for cole slaw or peel apples. Other community members, including men, lend a helping hand.

The preparation really begins at the end of July when the restaurant committee gets together to freeze about 120 quarts of corn for chicken corn soup and for use as a vegetable at Friday night's supper. The men husk and the women blanch and cut off, Margaret said.

Then, toward the end of August, the restaurant committee meets to decide on prices and what items will be offered on the menu. Last year, they added iced tea to the menu, but for the most part, Margaret said, the menu stays the same.

About two or three weeks before the fair committee chairman Elsie Houser orders the food. "She sees



Peeling apples isn't an overwhelming chore when you have lot's of help - even when you have to peel six bushels. From left are Elsie Houser, Edna Beiler and Margaret Lefever.

that everything's there for us," Edna explained.

Among other things, the order includes 600 pounds of chicken, 200 pounds of cabbage, and six bushels of apples. Elsie says she looks over her record book that she keeps from year to year to determine how much to order.

"I kind of go from the year before," she says. If they ran out of something last year, Elsie is sure to order a little extra the next year.

One year they used all the roast beef for supper and had none left for lunch the next day. "There was no beef for my beef stew," Edna recalled.

To make sure that lunch would be ready for the next day, she spent the whole night roasting beef from her own freezer. However, she says, that doesn't happen very often, because Elsie is an excellent planner who has years of experience to rely on.

The actual food preparation begins at 6 a.m. on the Tuesday before the fair, when Edna and Margaret can be found in the kitchen at the Lampeter Fire Company, putting the chickens on to boil, and preparing cole slaw and applesauce. By 8:30 a.m. other volunteers will start arriving to debone the chickens and help with other chores.

Early Wednesday morning Margaret is back in the kitchen, making the popular chicken corn soup that is traditionally served for Wednesday's lunch. She says she makes seven 20 to 24-quart kettles of the steaming soup. Later in the morning Edna shows up to make the stuffing and put the chicken in the ovens for the evening meal.

The number of women in the kitchen at one time varies throughout the day. "It seems like it's really a beehive," Edna said.

Working together, the volunteers manage to feed about 250 to 300 people at lunch time and about 525 to 625 people at the evening meal. "That varies depending on the weather," Margaret pointed out.

With that many people coming to eat during two-hour time span that the meals are served, it is inevitable that customers have to wait in line. Sometimes, they wait as long as 45 minutes to sink their teeth into the luscious food that awaits them in the cafeteria-style food line.

"The food must be all right or I guess they wouldn't stand in line," Edna chuckled.

From time to time, one of the cooks will poke her head out of the kitchen to see how long the line is and to decide if more food will be needed. "You have a big line to

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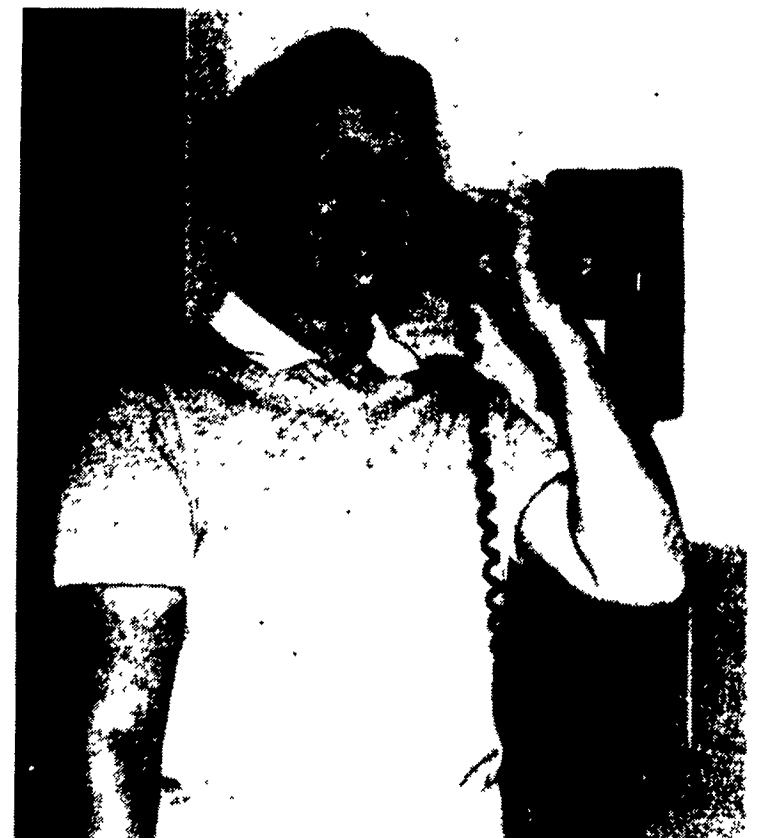
Edna Beiler adds a little milk to her mashed potatoes in the mixer that was recently added to the fire hall's kitchen.



Edna and Margaret review Edna's record book, an important resource when deciding what and how much to make.



Margaret Lefever takes a pan out of one of the kitchen's three large ovens.



Elsie Houser orders all the food for the fair restaurant.