American Culture and Cookbooks in Genesee County, New York, 1830-1920

by

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Introduction

In 1918 the Woman's Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church of Corfu published *The Genesee County Cook Book*. A cursory examination of the book reveals a wide variety of recipes for foods ranging from pickles through Yorkshire Pudding to shredded wheat oyster patties.* While it is instructive to read about the many dishes outlined in this work – and to even sample some of them – it is also important to recognize that there is a deeper and profound subtext in works such as *The Genesee County Cook Book*. To see these cookbooks otherwise – be they from Genesee County or elsewhere in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – is to run the risk of trivializing the past. Facts for their own sake may be interesting, but facts seen within the context of their wider meaning for what can be called the "human condition" drive home just how relevant – and important – the past really is.

Accordingly, reading such cookbooks as *The Genesee County Cook Book* reveals much about broader, deeper trends discernible both in our County and in wider America as well between 1830 and 1920. These cookbooks serve to

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*Oyster patties are described as follows – one quart oysters, eight shredded wheat biscuits, one pint milk, and four level tablespoons of wheat flour, along with four level tablespoons of butter, one teaspoon of scraped onion, one cup of oyster liquor, salt, and white pepper. The oysters are then picked and cavities in the biscuits are filled. Oyster liquor covers the top of the biscuits, and topped again by butter, and then cooked in a "quick" oven for twenty-five minutes. The dish was then served with white sauce made from the milk, oyster liquor, flour, butter, a teaspoon of scraped onion, and one-half teaspoon of salt.

illustrate how food habits functioned – especially within the context of middle class life in an agricultural setting such as Genesee County. Despite the proliferation of works that historians have produced over the last forty or so years regarding social history – or the history of daily life – there is a surprising lack of work on what eating patterns reveal about a host of issues – family life, the function of gender in American culture, and the role of religion are just some of the areas of life that come to mind when one examines what appear to be, at least initially, a simple rendition of recipes.

In this relatively short presentation I will stress a number of themes that are played out in cookbooks published throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first of these is the reality of a growing abundance in American life between 1830 and 1920. That abundance can be seen in numerous areas of American life by the beginning of the twentieth century. Incomes of nonfarm workers grew in the years after the Civil War, stimulated by increased productivity in industry, the service sector, and in agriculture. New technologies and an increased access to capital helped many American farmers – including those in Genesee County. Following a national trend, growing numbers of farmers in Western New York capitalized on the increased demand for dairy products, along with fruits and vegetables. The Wiard Plow Company of Batavia, opening in 1876, replicated locally what John Deere's steel plow factory in Moline, Illinois instituted nineteen years before when it introduced a steel plow serving to replace the older, far less effective iron plow. Such technological innovations by 1920 doubled the numbers of people fed by one farmer, which created a surplus of food and labor no longer needed on the farm. Expanding industrial, urban centers hungered for such labor, which produced the ironic spectacle of personal hardships for families not enthusiastic about the departure of young people for locations far from home.

This abundance of food thus had its disadvantages. Family dislocation produced by a technology replacing agricultural labor was matched at the same moment by the lingering presence of poverty. Not all farmers had access to land they could own – or even could hold onto land that they did in fact own. As early as 1839 tenant farmers in the Hudson River Valley confronted the power of

landowners possessing an estimated two million acres of land. Three years earlier in Batavia a similar confrontation took place, and was described in the 1890 publication of the *Gazetteer and Biographical Record of Genesee County, N.Y, 1788-1890*. Focusing upon groups of disgruntled residents upset over rental charges who, as a result, had broken into the offices of the Holland Land Company in Mayville and who were planning similar insurrections in Attica, Alexander, and Batavia, "fifty men were posted in the (Holland) land office"

> after the (land) records were removed to a place of safety; the bells rang and citizens gathered well-armed; the mob several hundred strong appeared in the street near the land office, and halted the approach of Sheriff Townsend, with 120 men armed with bright, loaded muskets, added to the already formidable force, saved any open attack, and, probably, much bloodshed; for it is a matter of record that if any attempt at violence had been made by the mob they would have been slain by scores at the delivery of the first fire from the sheriff's force and the citizens.

The New York State Legislature itself almost three decades earlier, in 1808, recognized the persistence of poverty alongside growing abundance when it enacted a law, on March 19th of that year, stating

> . . . That it shall be the duty of the supervisors and overseers of the poor of . . . Batavia, Warsaw, and Sheldon, as soon as may be after the first town meetings in said towns, and after public notice being given for that purpose, to meet together and apportion the poor and poor monies, belonging to the town of Batavia, agreeable to the . . . tax list, and that each town shall thereafter respectively maintain their own poor.

My point here, in what might appear at first glance to be an inexplicable digression, is to simply suggest that the bounty appearing in the era's cookbooks is in fact an abundance not shared by all. But for those fortunate enough to partake of the era's prosperity, that abundance took a variety of forms in such works as *The Genesee County Cook Book*. Ironically, the plenty suggested in that work was one producing a clear irony – in a book in which the focus is upon a collection of recipes there was a simultaneous acknowledgment that American life was becoming increasingly hectic. Even in a rural area such as Genesee County there was a tendency to rush one's meal – rather than savor it and cultivate the habit of relaxed social intercourse. To hurry a meal was to be seduced by a modern industrial, urban culture that robbed one of the ability to enjoy the simple things in life – abundance could therefore breed discontent. As a result, it should not be surprising that *The Genesee County Cook Book* contained advertisements issuing warnings about the perils of modern life - and the consequent necessity of staying on the land and in the process managing abundance without being ruled by it. An example of this is F.E. Horning's full-page advertisement in which the reader was challenged to "Ask Yourself These Questions":

> Does your present business permit you to enjoy life? If not make a change – buy a farm before it is too late. I have over 300 farms at real bargain prices.

As this advertisement proposes, plenty does not necessarily equate with happiness. Hence a bounty of food has to be balanced with a sufficient amount of emotional satisfaction:

> People are learning their lessons these days. People who have starved in the city, on meager, unwholesome food, and people who have starved their minds with meager, unwholesome lives are learning the lesson that only the earth can teach.

The advertisement then went on to add that:

> There are no longer any slaves punching mules, the real slaves are punching clocks. It is a poor man these days who doesn't own a farm. Not a poor man financially, but a poor man mentally.

As we shall see, greater amounts of abundance meant contradictions in the era's cookbooks, and this was as true for Genesee County as it was for the nation at large.

In another sense, national patterns were playing themselves out locally as well. Cookbook presentations of recipes also meant a clear depiction of status, and how in this regard social rank was expressed in what appears to be at first glance a simple listing of recipes. Genesee County cookbooks reveal a marked preoccupation with the relationship between food and status. This is very much in keeping with a pattern evident nationwide in hundreds of cookbooks published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The conception of excellence in food, and dining in general, was at least partially derived from what was observed or at least read about with regard to the upper class. Despite the presence of democratic rural values, what can be called the cult of emulation, if anything, intensified by the opening decades of the twentieth century. One example on the national level will suffice to introduce the point. Nebraska novelist and pioneer Bess Streeter Aldrich was remembered by her daughter, Mrs. Milton Beechner, as "well known for her luscious Lady Baltimore cakes, and her salads served from the gold rimmed Haviland china dish with the pink roses" as she was for her pioneering experiences and spirit. By the opening decades of the twentieth century the process of food fashion had peaked in such publications as *For the Hostess: A Handbook for Entertaining* and *We Dine on Linen Damask*. As will be shown, this made its way into Genesee County cookbooks as well, as revealed in the 1889 publication of the *LeRoy Recipe Book*, which featured dishes found in exclusive New York, Boston, and San Francisco restaurants. Here Fricasseed Oysters, Currant Wine Sauce, Charlotte Russe, and Turbot A La Crème were only some of the dishes satisfying what historian Arthur Schlessinger later termed "the

cult of elegance" in his 1946 classic entitled *Learning How to Behave: A Historical Study of American Etiquette Books*.

As scholars such as Schlessinger and others have long argued, a concern with stylish food was matched by the importance attached to the setting of the meal itself. Genesee County cookbooks replicated a broader trend that had as its objective the portrayal of food and dining as a badge of success.

Yet those same cookbooks also acknowledged those less fortunate. This is not surprising, as abundance for some through the early twentieth century was equaled – if not surpassed – by severe downturns in the economy. The social dislocations induced by the Panic of 1873 gave rise to what some historians still refer to as the "Year of Violence" in 1877, a moment characterized by riots and violent strikes. Reformers emerging from those relatively unaffected by economic downturns consequently attempted to devise ways for the poor to better cope with limited economic resources. One of these methods was an economical use of food – and this approach was evident in many cookbooks both in and outside of Genesee County. Echoing the work of Juliet Corson, who authored such books as *Family Living On $500 a Year* and *Fifteen And Twenty-Five Cent Dinners*, the thrust here was that domestic economy for the poor could not include emulation of the more privileged. "False pride" and "the petty ambition to go ahead of their neighbors" were luxuries the poor could not afford. "Our recipes," the authors of *Warner's Safe Cook Book* argued in 1887, "have been written with the view of economy, not by reducing the quantity or quality of the ingredients, but suggesting many ways in which a considerable saving may be accomplished." This book, widely in evidence throughout Genesee County by the end of the nineteenth century, is one of several simultaneously stressing a view of food selection, preparation, and consumption in line with what can be understood as pseudoscience and food faddism that was connected to ideas about what people should eat – and why.

Accordingly, as we enter the early twentieth century, numerous cookbooks were replete with debates about vegetarianism and the relative worth of fish and meat dishes. What is visible on the national level was also discernible in Genesee

County cookbooks. While we shall explore what is meant by food faddism and pseudoscience later in this talk, suffice it to say that this was a prolonged dialogue that took numerous forms. There were those advocating an all-beef diet, while others rejected beef entirely. Others insisted that vegetarian diets inhibited creativity, while others maintained that breakfast was detrimental – while yet others asserted it was the most important meal of the day.

But regardless of the fad, all claimed to have scientific evidence on their side. In this sense, nineteenth and early twentieth century cookbooks bore similarities to the popular books on medicine. Integral here was the personal testimony in which a person bore witness to the effectiveness of the fad under consideration. As will be shown, this translated into a person describing sometimes horrific health problems which – predictably – were cured by the food faddism that was the focus of the proponent. Maybe the most interesting and influential of these food faddists was Horace Fletcher, whose ideas made their way into numerous cookbooks and health remedy books. Convinced there was a "filter function" in the back of one's mouth that accomplished much of the digestive process, he emphasized the necessity of chewing food until it had no taste and was involuntarily swallowed. In other words, chew one's food about one hundred times. Such pseudoscience flew in the face of what cookbooks had to offer in terms of enjoyment and food taste, reminding us of the complexity – and ambivalence – that was rampant in what appeared to be, at least superficially, a simple listing of recipes. Of course, much of what was seen on the local level was an articulation of what one routinely witnessed in the United States at large.

The National Pattern

Before exploring in some detail patterns visible in Genesee County it is instructive to at least touch upon national developments. Despite the economic downturns of the late nineteenth century, the United States emerged as an industrial powerhouse in the years after the Civil War. This economic transformation perpetuated a culture imbued with the values of plenty, and this shift to a mindset of abundance was, as already suggested, quite evident in American cookbooks. Simon N. Patten, the influential economist who authored

such books as *The Stability of Prices* (1888), argued that there was an unintended consequence to this growing abundance – simply put, he said, a wider distribution of wealth does not necessarily ensure prosperity or health for all Americans. Arguing for what can be called educated consumption, Patten stressed that Americans shed a growing inclination for gluttony and ostentation, which he saw as traits developed in previous eras of scarcity – and which were, by 1888, inappropriate in a newer age blessed with a surplus of goods.

Along these lines, leading cookbooks authors, such as Sallie Joy White, Sarah Tyson Rorer, and Marie Hansen-Taylor, all urged Americans to limit the amount of food they ate in accordance with their understanding of sound nutritional principles. Their emphasis upon vegetables, lean meats, and modes of preparation other than frying was indicative of an attempt to transform consumers from the practice of utilizing food as an expression of personal prosperity and instead have them base their choice of food on more biologically sound reasons. "Banish the frying pan," wrote Rorer in such newspapers as the *Philadelphia Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in the 1890s, "and there will not be much sickness either in city or country."

Cookbook authors such as Rorer acknowledged the growing amounts and variety of foods available, but asserted that Americans should restrict themselves to foods that were both appealing *and* functional. Spices should consequently be limited. They urged the baking of bread rather than the purchase of it from commercial bakers. Standard fare included eggs, cereals, macaroni, strawberries, various jellies and preserves, and salad. Numerous cookbook authors warned against excessive meat consumption, which was equated with gout, rheumatism, and dyspepsia. If meat was eaten, they advised that it should be restricted to those times of the year when it was colder. In sum, the focus was very much on a functional use of food, thus undermining its role in the production of status.

Not surprisingly, some of the cookbook authors directed their attention to Americans of more modest means. By the early twentieth century Progressive reformers emerging from the middle class sought to soften the harshest features of industrial capitalism. One group of reformers who were writing cookbooks

were also involved in the reformation of working class dietary habits with the express purpose of easing the plight of the poor by stretching their household budgets via a reduction in the amount spent for food. The new profession of Home Economics played a pivotal role here, and their ideas could be found in numerous late nineteenth and early twentieth century cookbooks. An example of what these reformers had in mind takes us once again to Sarah Tyson Rorer. Like other reformers who were also cookbook authors, Rorer had a strong temperance perspective that found fertile ground in working class, immigrant ghettoes. Convinced that "the hankering of the ill-fed stomach drives men to drink," she lent legitimacy to the American Public Health Association's explanation for alcoholism as a product of "bad cooking, unpalatable meals, and the extravagant use of ice." As a consequence – and this is visible in a number of cookbooks – the writers encouraged the use of coffee, as coffee, according to the American Public Health Association, was part of "a physiological antagonism between coffee and alcohol. . . "

Accordingly, reformers in areas such as Pennsylvania included coffee in two of the day's three suggested meals. For example, families of moderate means were encouraged to have meals such as those shown below:

Breakfast: eggs, corncakes, potatoes, coffee,
Rhubarb, bread, butter

Dinner: soup, bread, butter

Supper: Lamb stew with dumplings, cucumber,
eggplant, beans, corn, coffee, bread and
butter, fruit.

While times of economic stress precluded menus such as that referred to above, such menus were *ideals* that reformers urged as goals to be attained – while simultaneously recognizing that this was not always possible. Underlying such aspirations was a set of assumptions about "scientific principles" which also made their way into the era's culinary tracts, and which found expression – nationally – in a host of food fads also seen in some of the cookbooks of Genesee

County. Once again, we need a cursory introduction to these national trends to comprehend more fully what is evident in County cookbooks of the era.

As alluded to previously, the late 1800s and early 1900s was a moment characterized by numerous fads regarding food and an underlying "science" purporting to justify such fashions. The aforementioned food faddist Horace Fletcher was not the only prominent advocate of radical eating habits finding their way into a number of cookbooks. More dramatically – and with far more lingering consequences for us even today – was the work of Harvey Kellogg.

His Battle Creek sanatorium had roots in the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, not to mention the earlier work of William Sylvester Graham in the 1830s, whose graham cracker – an antebellum health food – remains with us today. At Kellogg's sanatorium patients enjoyed – or more fittingly endured – individually-designed diets; regimens fashioned to address their personal circumstances. Underweight patients were fed as many as twenty-six times per day, and were compelled to lie still in their beds with sandbags on their stomachs to assist in the absorption of nutrients. Those suffering from high blood pressure were fed enormous amounts of grapes – and nothing but grapes – as many as fourteen pounds per day. Out of this sanatorium Kellogg's corn flakes and Post's grape-nuts emerged, the former as a vegetarian health food. Food faddism and its concurrent scientific rationales eventually became big business via industrial food processors – and their presence was normalized in countless cookbooks and medical self-help manuals populating the American landscape by the opening decades of the twentieth century. Yet, despite the amount of severity apparent in much of food faddism, an abundance expressed in Genesee County cookbooks still reared its head between 1830 and 1920.

The Pattern in Genesee County

Within the context of the nineteenth and early twentieth century a clear characteristic evident in Genesee County cookbooks is the sheer amount of food alluded to. A foreign visitor to the County throughout this period would most likely express amazement at the quantities of food involved in the cookbooks'

recipes. One 1889 Thanksgiving Menu referred to a Breakfast and a Dinner which stood out for its bounty even within the context of the Thanksgiving holiday.

Breakfast

Stewed Oysters
Broiled Quail, Currant Jelly
Baked Sweet Potatoes
Lamb Chops, Tomato Sauce
Toasted Muffins
Grapes

Dinner

Blue Points
Consomme Royale
Broiled Smelts, Sauce Tartare
Duchesse Potatoes
Ragout of Mallard Duck
Cauliflower, Canned Peas
Roast Turkey, Cranberry Sauce
Escarole Salad
Plum Pudding
Cheese Fruits Nuts
Coffee

In *The Guild Cook Book* compiled by The Ladies Guild of Oakfield's St. Michael's Episcopal Church in 1910, there was no less than sixteen distinct categories of recipes, ranging from "fish and oysters" through "meats" to "pickles and relishes" and "cookies and doughnuts." Earlier publications, such as the 1889 appearance of the *LeRoy Recipe Book*, included a voluminous amount of recipes for soups, fish, fish and meat sauces, eggs, bread, cake, and creams and custards – to name but a few. Visitors to the County – particularly foreigners – expressed shock and amazement at the sheer amount of food consumed. Not only did outsiders comment on the amount of food eaten, but so too did County residents. For

example, an article entitled “That Clam Bake” appeared in *The Batavian* on August 23, 1895. In this piece the reader is told that the

> . . . 350 persons (in attendance) ate an average of 8 clams, 1 sweet potato, 2 Irish potatoes, one third ear of corn, and one quarter of a chicken each. Of course all did not have appetites equal to that capacity but what some lacked others made up for and it would not be polite to say from what locality the biggest eaters came.

Less than a year later, (March 20, 1896), that same newspaper, *The Batavian,* having run articles on the abundance of food and the problem of overindulgence, featured two articles on the necessity of controlling intake in an era of abundance. In “What To Eat,” people “who are unable to take much exercise should not eat pastry.” In a less subtle article, entitled “Famous Fat Freaks,” *The Batavian* offered a litany of stories regarding excessively overweight people, ranging from English shopkeepers weighing in at six hundred sixteen pounds, to another person in England, in this instance a four year old girl, who weighed two hundred fifty six pounds. Abundance could therefore be a blessing and a scourge when moderation was eschewed. Tables groaning with too much food not only produced questionable physiological results, it also yielded a waste of food which undermined older American notions of self-restraint and frugality. Too much food, as already suggested earlier on, also produced an ironic twist – a vague indifference to the very food necessary for life. Because there was no fear of hunger for many, there was a casual approach to the meal that struck some observers as unusual. As Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe phrased it in their 1869 publication of *The American Woman’s Home*, the typical American table

> presents a fine abundance of material, carelessly and poorly treated. The management of food is nowhere in the world, perhaps, more slovenly and wasteful. Everything betokens that want of care that waits on abundance.

Yet, one can argue that the Beechers go too far in their criticism. Indeed, one can assert that it was the quest for status evident in Genesee County cookbooks – not to mention cookbooks at large in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – which produced the very intricate care that the Beechers maintained was absent. This was seen not only in Genesee County cookbooks but, in addition, in local newspaper depictions of culinary trends.

In an article entitled "Household Matters" appearing in *The Batavian* on August 3, 1895, the reader was offered an extensive description of a proper dinner setting:

> At dinner the bread is no longer placed upon the plates before the guests enter, but is passed by the servant while the soup is being served. If the soup is distributed before dinner is announced, the napkin is placed at the left of the plate, upon the menu. At the left is also the fork, while at the right are the knife, resting upon a crystal or silver support, the spoon and the oyster fork, if oysters form a part of the repast. Where the soup is served at table the guest finds his napkin in his plate. The menu card has his name written on the back and is placed on its face to serve as guest card.

The writer concluded with this:

> At a recent fashionable French dinner there was no menu at all and no dessert, which is an innovation worth acclimatizing.

The passage above illuminates a radical shift in the ambience of the meal. Such a newspaper account – and the stress placed on style in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Genesee County cookbooks – is not to suggest that most dinners looked "stylish." However, it does represent an ideal that people in some cases were striving for – contrast "Household Matters" in 1895 with a description

of an early nineteenth century social gathering in Batavia, which is found in the 1850 publication of the *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York*:

> In February 1805, we settled upon a farm near Batavia. There were then inhabitants enough to make an agreeable neighborhood. We used to have ox-sled rides, occasionally it would be out to uncle Gid Dunham's, where we used to avail ourselves of the services of the left-handed fiddler, Russell Noble. Some of our earliest parties were got up by first designating the log house of some settler, and each one contributing to the entertainment; one would carry some flour, another some sugar, another some eggs, another some butter, and so on; the aggregate making up a rustic feast.

We are then told by the author, O. Turner, that these

> Parties would alternate from house to house. Frolics in the evening would uniformly attend husking bees, raisings, quiltings and pumpkin pearings. All were social, friendly, obliging – there was little aristocracy in those primitive days.

The "aristocracy" that Turner was directing our attention to was captured in the ideal table setting of "Household Matters." In such articles and similar cookbook descriptions one can detect that the conception of excellence in food – and dining in general – was derived from what was observed or read about the elite. Fashionable restaurants outside of Genesee County set the example. Foods and settings of such establishments set the pace, and the kind of frolicking described in an earlier Genesee County began to vanish from a more formal, less casual "rustic feast."

Hence the foodways of the less privileged began to be viewed not as an expression of democracy in action but instead as an articulation of those less sophisticated. But despite such class tensions even those of more modest means found ways to strive for status via the use of food. One example of this is some of the descriptions of what can be described as the butter wars. On August 17, 1895, *The Batavian* contained an article entitled "A Butter Roast," a portion of which is shown below:

> It requires a deal of argument to convince one woman that her butter is not as good as her neighbor's butter. Probably not more than one-fifth of the farmers' wives know how to make, or do make, good table butter, such as you would like to soak a slice of toast with, for instance, or spread on to a hot biscuit.

The writer of this article then goes on to add that

> Our agricultural papers talk a great deal about improved methods in butter making, but as a rule, we believe, the butter made by the farmers' wives of 25 years ago, who knew how to make butter, was better than that made to-day by the creameries with all of their thermometers, traps, and fiddlesticks.

Accordingly, the reader is told that

> Good butter is made by intuition. That's all there is about it. One good housewife makes one article that is grabbed up in the market at sight. Another good housekeeper, next door neighbor, under the same conditions, makes a wretched "stab" at butter making; but what is stranger than this diversity in making is the fact that the poor butter maker insists that her's is as good as her neighbors, when in fact it may not be fit to put on the table, and flounces

> out of the store in a highly indignant state of mind, because the storekeeper has intimated as much.

In conclusion, the butter wars and the battle for status means that

> very little good butter ever comes into this market, comparatively. There has even been creamery butter in this market that would make a dog sick.

It seems fair to conclude that the search for status evident in culinary culture was not one restricted to those of more affluence. A staple such as butter also had the consequence of inducing status-seeking competition. Just as commonly, the role of food fads and what can be called pseudoscience also played a role in how people thought about food, be it discernible in a Genesee County cookbook or a Genesee County newspaper. But whatever the food fad was, there was always the common pattern of personal testimony. The testimonies included a wide variety of food and food-related issues. On June 26, 1896, *The Batavian* ran a standard advertisement in this regard that was as much an article as it was publicity for a constipation remedy:

> A lucky accident for Rev. J.M. Stevenson, Hawthorne, N.J., who writes "By rare accident I was made acquainted with Dr. Deane's Dyspepsia Pills. They act gently and like a charm, correcting the secretions and preventing constipation. I subscribe myself your friend, as your pills are welcome friends to me."

Three months later, on September 18, 1896, *The Batavian* once again offered personal testimonies regarding, in this instance, the fad of replacing coffee with the grain drink Postum:

> Coffee drinkers may be interested to know the opinion of some competent physicians in regard to the use of Postum, the grain

> drink, in place of coffee. Let it be understood that the manufacturers do not decry the use of coffee by healthy persons, but there is a great army of intelligent men and women of the present day who cannot stand the steady daily poison of coffee, tobacco and whiskey without feeling the effect in some serious bodily derangement.
>
> Dr. F.F. Cassady, editor of the "Medical Argus," Minneapolis, Minn., writes, enclosing the money for a third case, and is kind enough to add: "I fully coincide with your views in regard to the use of coffee and tobacco by neurasthenics (nervous patients). I am using Postum every day and am greatly pleased with it."

Time limitations preclude a more extensive development of how personal testimonies legitimized the effectiveness of something like Postum in terms of improving one's health – and how the stress placed on a pseudoscience routinely made its way not only into the pages of a publication such as *The Batavian*, but also, on a regular basis, into the cookbooks of Genesee County.

Conclusion

As the title of this short essay suggests, I have explored the links between an American culture forming in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and its expression in cookbooks and other published discussions of food habits. However, an exploration is a search – not a complete and exhaustive journey. I hope that I have stimulated thought on the richness of what can be called *culinary documents*, and what those historical sources tell us about the wonderful tapestry of Genesee County's history.

Cookbooks and articles about food in local newspapers were an expression of a belief system going to the heart of our County's past – the role played by

Protestantism, the tension between rural values and the emerging industrial, urban culture of modern America, and notions of gender are just a few of the areas of County life found in these historical sources. The fact that all of this – and more – is found in something like cookbooks and newspapers reminds us of the public role played by that most private of acts – preparing and consuming a meal.

The implications for our own day are clear. Given the seemingly confusing opinions regarding nutrition offered by "experts" it is difficult for Americans to persist in one express way of eating. Like our nineteenth century ancestors, we are whisked along from one food panic to another. Convenience vies with time-consuming meal preparation to only complicate the meal ritual. Nonetheless, we also see today some underlying constants from an earlier era, not the least of which is the premise that taste alone is not a reliable indication of what one ultimately should eat. What make a particular food important are variables that one cannot see – but which one can discover in a laboratory. *The Guild Cook Book* of Oakfield's St. Michael's Episcopal Church's advocacy of the worth of peanut butter was not simply founded upon taste, as *The Batavian* article of December 11, 1896 reminds us in "The Plebeian Peanut:"

> The peanut, which for so many years has been the popular feature of the country fair and the circus, is now creeping into prominence. Doctors have found that the peanut is an article of food, "rich in albumen, of which it contains 50 per cent. . . "

The humble peanut, enjoying the legitimacy of organized science, did not only taste good – it contained the nutrients making it appropriate for a serious cookbook. Already, one can see a journey that culminates in our own day in a government agency suggesting what people should – or should not – eat. But the implications of eating certain foods for "those at risk" would be another discussion, and one with political implications taking us far beyond the borders of this talk.