

1937

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### Recommended Citation

Richardson, Welch (1937) "15 Years at a Cook Stove," *The Iowa Homemaker*: Vol. 17 : No. 4 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol17/iss4/3>

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Here is a man who can boil water—with potatoes in it



# 15 Years At a Cook Stove

By Welch Richardson

ONCE, in my extreme youth on an Iowa farm, we had a hired girl. She was probably the most inefficient, incompetent cook I ever found, and her name was legion. My mother, home infrequently, would drive her from the kitchen in desperation at the sight of sad biscuits, disconsolate steaks and watery gravies, and take over the meals herself.

Our next hired girl dropped mother's best Haviland with perfect equanimity, baked sad biscuits, broiled disconsolate steaks and made watery gravy.

As I remember it, father was an abnormally patient man and would come in after a hard day's work, sit down at the table, and eat rapidly, with his eyes closed and taste buds quivering. At nine, even I was able to realize that there was much in my culinary background that was lacking and saw with a peculiar acuteness that when mother came home, the food was good. My brother, at 11, was even outspoken about the whole matter.

"Dirty Ol' Liz," he called the hired girl, with a fine discernment for her peculiar properties.

In desperation, my father once observed that his two sons, 9 and 11, could do a better job of keeping house than the hired girls. We seconded him manfully, and a bit too precipitately.

We got the job.

The hired girl's wage (remember this was during boom days) of \$6 per week was divided 60-40, according to our respective ages and we moved into the kitchen.

Those first meals were horrible travesties of cooking. Untrained, although willing, we made devastating and frequent mistakes.

By diligent application, however, we soon learned that ranges WOULD burn things if not watched and that there was a peculiar art in cooking meats to a delicate golden brown, tender and succulent. We learned, by frequent demonstrations from both father and mother, that vegetables were not the indestructible things they seemed and that flavor was often a matter of correct cooking, rather than an inherent

property. Experience taught us that the rules for making pastry were valid and that dire results attended a disregard of them.

Consequently, by the time brother was 14 and I was 12, we had learned the first rudiments of the gentle art of housewifery. When high school came along, we drove the 7 miles to school for a while. Then brother and I moved to town, had an apartment of sorts and started cooking again.

Here, the scope was a little different. On the farm, there was no budget. You liberally used milk, eggs and butter and delved into the capacious basement where tiered rows of canned goods and bins of vegetables lined the walls. There it was no question of whether or not it would fit the budget, but whether or not you wanted to bother about cooking it.

We learned to cook all over again, city dweller style this time. There was no necessity for the heavy meals we had prepared at home, but we carried over one tradition of the family. That was the one of steak, gravy and hot biscuits for breakfast on Sunday morning.

An uncle of mine, of an inquiring turn of mind, once traced the family tree back to ancient yeoman, English ancestry. He found, he said, that all the men were bald, most of them smoked cigars and that they always had steak for breakfast. We are a law abiding family.

Eventually, we were in college together and the cooking tradition went on. The first college years of eating in boarding houses and restaurants and living in furnished rooms had cured us of eating out.

We started on the final lap of our 15 years behind a range and for two years held forth in a "garret" with gabled roofs and a tendency in the winter to freeze and in the spring and fall to cook.

People (mostly for politeness, I think) gasp in amazement that we two men are able to duplicate the cooking feats of most women. Women guests have admired the culinary art and admitted that they knew nothing at all of the matter.

Personally, I think that anyone can cook, and with excellent results, if they will only remember this obvious, but startling fact:

By rights, you'll have to eat the stuff after you've cooked it. That should make you think!

Of course, there are technicalities to the trade. Brother and I, who learned to cook from our mother, who in turn learned from a Negro mammy in the deep south, are devotees of the "dab-o'-this" and "pinch-o'-that" methods. Fingers to us are the most useful of cooking instruments.

Our method, we believe, is the trademark of the true chef, who takes pride in his work. (The most famous chefs of history, of course, are men.)

Recipe books are to be inspected with



caution, and you should be able to tell from the ingredients whether or not you'll like that new concoction.

Also, you should be able, with one trial or so, to be able to duplicate any product by analyzing the constituents and not even seeing the original. Brother, who is a chemist, has an immeasurable advantage over me there. There are many similarities, he says. Your variations upon original recipes should be handled with caution, but still with a cheerful, open minded, scientific attitude.

Now, brother is married and has a wife who attends to kitchen matters—very deftly, too, I might add, although her training has been supplemented a little with his skill.

I still like to get out into the kitchen. And, as another selfmade chef often observes, we can bake the best biscuits in the world.

After all, we are the only judges of what WE like in biscuits, and our standard products are standard, because we set the standards. Anyway, we prefer home cooking.