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Food Class for Foresters

by Russell B. McKennan, 1925

Spring quarter of 1925, there must have been 16 or 18 of us who decided to sign up for a course in camp cooking, offered for forestry students by the Home Economics Department.

The course wasn't required, and we earned no credit. It was simply a class for foresters who wanted to learn something about camp cooking.

The class met one day a week, after our regular classes. I think we went over at about 4:00 in the afternoon; and for two hours we worked in groups of four, turning out choice morsels such as sour dough pancakes, sour dough biscuits, muffins. I remember one afternoon we learned how to make popovers — why, I'll never know!

We cooked meat and regular meals, too — but they were meals we could use in the field.

About the only summer jobs for foresters used to be out in the woods — timber cruising, scaling, survey jobs. In 1924 and 1925, a number of us worked for the Forest Service out in western Colorado.

The first time I wound up doing the cooking for a crew, we had just moved our gear from one of the little "cow towns" on the western slope to our

camp site. The hired cook managed the move out from town all right; he knew how to pack a wagon. But from the campsite into the area where we were working, there just weren't any roads. We had to pack everything in — and "old John" knew less than nothing about packing horses. We sent him down the trail talking to himself, and I had to take over the cooking for the five-man crew until we could hire another cook.

In Colorado, we got into town often enough that we could get some variety in our meals. But that wasn't the story in northern Minnesota.

I went to work for the Army Engineers after I graduated; and the first year we were working on the Northern Light Lake, 80 miles from the nearest little town of Winton, Minnesota. We packed in all of our food in the fall; during the winter our diet consisted of beans, rice, coffee and sawbelly — some kind of cured meat not more than one or two of the men could eat. (And I wasn't one!) Most of the time we had moose and venison meat; but obviously, anything special we could get to eat was to be desired.

Three times a year, one of the local people made the trip out to our campsite with supplies. Lakes were frozen over, and it took a good dog team three to four days for the trip. Bill McGee, a forestry and wild-life man who has spent more than 50 years working in the Duluth area, brought most of our supplies in.

One trip I'm sure he remembers well was the time he broke through the ice over a section of rapids about a mile from our camp. He was driving his team over a shelf of ice, skirting the bank of a river. Each husky weighs about 60 pounds, and the weight of the sled — probably three or four hundred pounds — is spread along the 12-foot runners. Bill was following the sled, as the drivers usually do when they have a load. He had on snowshoes, of course, but his 180 pounds was too much, and he broke through. He had hold of the tail rope, and as he felt the ice go, he yelled "mush!" The dogs kept going, dragging him up onto the opposite bank. By the time he got into camp, his heavy clothing was a solid shell of ice; we had to crack it off him.

After we got him thawed out, we unloaded the sled and found that Bill had made that trip — the last one until spring — with the entire sled loaded with nothing but shredded wheat.

If he had an explanation, I don't think he got a chance to give it.

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