

"Baking Bread was a Weekly Activity"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Baking bread, pies and cakes was a local household activity from the settlement period in the eighteenth century until into the early twentieth century. Friday was the traditional baking day and most local families baked in a brick oven that was built into the house or was a freestanding structure. A description of family baking in Pleasant Valley was written by Emma Myers Read in 1961:

"Rubs, rubs, rubs, I'll tell you how important they were. Without rubs mother could not bake bread. You see, rubs was the yeast.

When I was a little girl, mother needed rubs for baking her bread, If mama had no rubs, she borrowed from Mr. Hahn or Mrs. Powell. If her neighbors were out of rubs, they borrowed from mama. Mother always kept her rubs in a muslin sack. They were dry blobs made of yellow cornmeal. I did not see mama make rubs; but I saw them and knew what they were. They were made during bread making time. Hop water was used, also potato water and yellow cornmeal. They were made in pinches or small blobs, then dried. When dry, they were stored in the muslin bag to keep fresh and clean. Mama baked six big loaves of bread each week, also a pan of rusks. They were so good. Each rusk was topped with a cinnamon icing. Mama baked her bread in the handsome cook stove in the kitchen. She used wood to heat the stove. Later on, mama used coal. Mama usually baked her bread on Friday. Her pies and cakes were baked on Saturday. Some country people used the big bake oven. We had one attached to the back of our house, it extended out back along side of the summer kitchen. It was not used. I remember it very well. I had my playhouse between the bake-oven and the summer kitchen. Here grew a straight mulberry tree, beneath which was my playhouse. I recall at the back of our kitchen, there was a door into a closet, we called it the chimney corner. In it mama had a table, where we washed the dishes. Hot water was gotten from the iron tea kettle which stood on the stove at all times. In the chimney corner on the back wall there was an iron door, when opened I could see inside, a big enclosed space where the bread could have been baked, but it was not used. It may have been too dangerous, therefore mama used the cook stove.

At almost every farm house you would see a bake oven. They were rounded or arched over top. The top was always white. I presume it was white-washed. I think they were built of brick in the form of an arch. Beneath the arch was the big space for the oven. I saw one, closely. I was at the home of Mrs. Simon Petry, near Pleasant Valley. I was there on the day she was baking. The men in her family had built a fire in the oven. They put split wood and logs in the oven to start the fire; closed the iron door in the front and let the fire burn for quite a long time. First they opened the iron door, the wood and logs were almost consumed, they waited a while, then opened the iron door again, they were burned, only charred embers were seen. The men with long-handled rakes, raked the embers to the door and let the ashes fall on the ground in front of the oven. Immediately Mrs. Petry's loaves were ready. On a long paddle she set the bread pans and so put her pans of bread into the oven. The bread was left in the oven for an hour or more. When the door was opened we saw that the bread was nicely brown.

Later, when the bread was done, the iron door was opened. A long handle paddle was slipped beneath each bread pan and so pulled toward the door where it could be lifted with pot holders from the oven. The embers that had been raked out fell in front of the oven and were kept there by an iron grating. I seem to remember a bake-oven at Grandma Fleagle's but she did not use it. She baked her bread in her

kitchen cook stove. As many as six or eight loaves could be baked in the bake oven at one time. How necessary, when there were so many to be fed. Rubs were the yeast used to raise the bread. Hops were used in making the yeast. My Grandma Fleagle had a hop vine which grew in the corner of her garden. The hop vine climbed a tree and gracefully hung down near the garden path. The hops were like closed green flowers, and were attractive as they dangled there at the end of the vine. They were taken off and dried. They were boiled in water like tea, when cool the hop water was used to mix with the yellow cornmeal to make the rubs or yeast. Bake ovens are out of style and are not used now a days, so one sees very few of them in the country."

The description of baking at the Petry house accurately described the day-long baking process that remained little changed for nearly two centuries. Unfortunately, as bake oven use declined the obsolete freestanding structures were not maintained and most have been demolished.

Photo caption: A nineteenth century stone farmhouse near Lineboro had a stone spring house and a freestanding log bake oven where the family baked bread, pies and cakes. Historical Society of Carroll County, photograph by Joe Getty, 1987.