

The

GLORIOUS FOURTH

Independence Day Celebrations on the Oregon Trail

By Jacqueline Williams



#61143-7, Asahel Curtis Collection, Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society

Overland Trail

150 YEARS



WE HOISTED a flag belonging to some of the company, and as we saw the stars and stripes floating in the breeze we felt quite patriotic. . . .

PICNIC BASKETS were not miraculously opened by the campfire when the emigrants paid tribute to Independence Day. Colorful firecrackers did not explode over the plains. But Fourth of July celebrations with special foods, toasts of good cheer and “guns bursting in air” occurred up and down the Platte and Sweetwater river valleys along the Oregon Trail.

How amazing it is that the travelers, weary from at least two months of journeying across the continent, still had the energy to prepare for a party.

If possible, overlanders tried to celebrate the Fourth of July in the vicinity of Independence Rock, in central Wyoming. The rock derived its name from the common wisdom of overland travel that advised emigrants to be at that juncture by Independence Day so as to reach the Cascades or Sierra Nevadas before the early snows.

Just as the folks back home varied the dishes in the picnic basket, so did the emigrants. From “cornstarch” cakes to an elaborate several-course meal, the holiday food depended on the tenacity of the cook and the supplies in the provisions box. Even the lowly potato could make the meal momentous. “Our dinner, in honor of the national anniversary, was the best we could provide. The last of our potatoes, which had long been saved for the occasion, made it a rare feast,” noted Margaret Frink.

Others turned the usual provisions into July the Fourth gastronomic de-

lights by making certain that the beans were baked instead of half cooked, and that there would be “some warm bread instead of burned hoe cake.” The Loughary party displayed the flag, shot off their guns, and let the children have a picnic. It was a typical Independence Day celebration:

The few stars and stripes were raised on top of our tents, a line of men drawn up, and a salute fired from a hundred little guns and pistols. Three cheers were lustily given for “our Country,” “The Soldiers in the field” and last though not least “The Captain’s new Grandbaby. . . .” All had a “go as you please time.” Some hunted or fished, others lounged around camp, while the children had a picnic under the bows [sic] of a large pine tree.

Distinctive foods were just part of the William Swains’ Fourth of July celebration. The group honored the day with speeches, songs and toasts:

We lay abed late this morn. After a late breakfast, we set about getting fuel for cooking our celebration dinner.

Our celebration of the day was very good, much better than I anticipated. . . . At twelve o’clock we formed a procession and walked under our national flag to stand to the tune of “The Star Spangled Banner. . . .” We then marched to the “hall,” which was formed by running the wagons in two rows close enough together for the wagon covers to reach from one to the other, thus forming a fine hall roofed by the covers and a comfortable place for the dinner table, which was set down the center.

Dinner consisted of: ham; beans, boiled and baked; biscuits; johnnycake; apple pie; sweet cake; rice pudding; pickles; vinegar; pepper sauce and mustard; coffee; sugar; and milk. All enjoyed it well.

After dinner the toasting commenced. The boys had raked and scraped together all the brandy they

could, and they toasted, hurrayed, and drank till reason was out and brandy was in. I stayed till the five regular toasts were drunk; and then, being disgusted with their conduct, I went to our tent, took my pen, and occupied the remainder of the day in writing to my wife.

Lorena Hays’s Independence Day menu contained 13 different dishes,

“The boys had raked together all the brandy they could, and they toasted, hurrayed, and drank till reason was out and brandy was in.”



including “quite a number of kinds of cake”; Phoebe Judson baked “cake of three varieties (fruit, pound and sponge)”; James Bascom Royal dined on frost cake; William Swain had a choice of johnnycake or sweet cake, and the Conyerses feasted on pound cake, fruit cake, jelly cake, Sweetwater cake and “a dozen or more varieties, both of cake and pies not enumerated.” Considering the fact that most of the cakes were probably baked in Dutch ovens or with tin reflectors strategically placed over makeshift dirt ovens, one realizes how important it was to the travelers to celebrate this holiday.

ICE CREAM desserts were also featured at several holiday festivities. Taking advantage of snow in nearby mountains, ingenious cooks sweetened their milk, packed it into containers and froze the concoction in



OPPOSITE: Emigrants on the Oregon Trail referred to the midday rest period as “nooning.” During this time they prepared meals, searched for water and fuel, and if they were lucky, rested.

make-shift ice cream machines. Thanks to Charles Parke, a recipe survives:

This being the nation's birthday. . . . Some visited two large banks of snow about half a mile from the ford on Sweetwater.

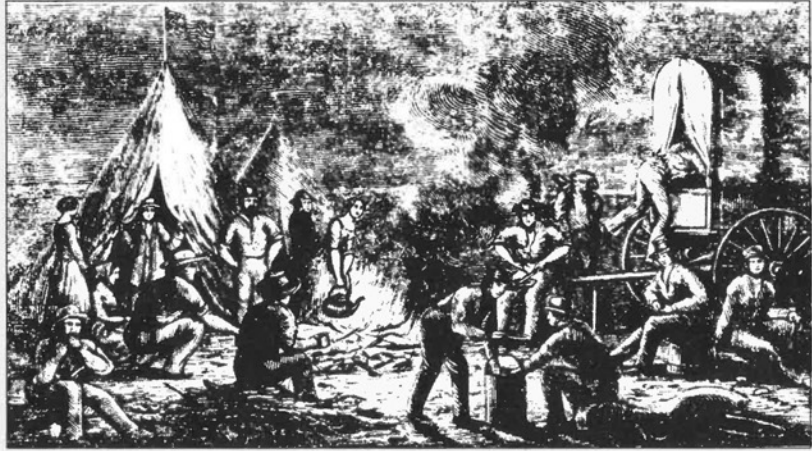
Having plenty of milk from two cows we had with us, I determined to [do] something no other living man ever did in this place and on this sacred day of the year, and that was to make Ice Cream at the South Pass of the Rockies. . . .

I procured a small tin bucket which held about 2 quarts. This I sweetened and flavored with peppermint—had nothing else. This bucket was placed inside a wooden bucket, or Yankee Pale [sic], and the top put on.

Nature had supplied a huge bank of coarse snow, or hail, nearby, which was just the thing for this new factory. With alternate layers of this, and salt between the two buckets and aid of a clean stick to stir with, I soon produced the most delicious ice cream tasted in this place. In fact, the whole company so decided, and as a compliment drew up in front of our Tent and fired a Salute, bursting one gun but injuring no one.

The Conyers party also feasted on ice cream. Sent out to bring back game for the Fourth of July dinner, the hunters found a huge snowball, which they carried back to camp by inserting a pole through the center. "The snowball was brought into use in making a fine lot of Sweetwater Mountain ice cream," noted Enoch Conyers. Presumably the cooks used a variation of Parke's method, since that recipe was similar to those found in period cookbooks.

Like other emigrants, the Conyers party spent a remarkable Fourth and ushered in the day with guns and the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner." The preparations began on July 3 when a "number of wagon beds are taken to pieces and formed into long tables." Everyone took part in the activities.



From *Overland to Oregon*, Special Collections, WSHS

The Conyers Party's Independence Day Feast

"THE DAY WAS ushered in with the booming of small arms, which was the best that we could do under the circumstances, so far away from civilization. . . . All gathered around the tables loaded with refreshments, beautified and decorated with evergreens and wild flowers of the valley, that speak volumes in behalf of the good taste displayed by the ladies, both in the decorative and culinary arts. The following is our bill of fare in part:

MEATS

Roast Antelope, Roast Sagehen, Roast Rabbit, Antelope Stew, Sagehen Stew, Jack-Rabbit Stew, Antelope Potpie, Sagehen Fried, Jack Rabbit Fried.

VEGETABLES

Irish Potatoes (brought from Illinois), Boston Baked Beans, Rice, Pickles.

BREAD

White Bread, Graham Bread, Warm Rolls, fresh from the oven.

PASTRY

Pound Cake, Fruit Cake, Jelly Cake, Sweetwater Mountain Cake, Peach Pie, Apple Pie, Strawberry Pie, Custard Pie. (A dozen or more varieties, both of cake and pies not enumerated.)

DRINKS

Coffee, Tea, Chocolate, and Good, Cold Mountain Water, fresh from the brook. . . .

Take it altogether, we passed an enjoyable day—a Fourth of July on the plains never to be forgotten."

The men gathered wood and hunted for game while the ladies made a flag and prepared a sumptuous repast.

THOUGH DAZZLING desserts starred at mealtime, emigrants also made a special attempt to obtain fish and fresh meat. Soups, stews and fried or roasted victuals prepared from antelope, sage hen, buffalo, fish, and wild fowl were

added attractions at holiday tables. The Buckingham's "breakfasted at six upon Trout Strawberries & cream." Francis Sawyer's family "went fishing this morning, then came back and cooked a good dinner." Chester Ingersoll killed a buffalo and served it for dinner, and Harry Rudd killed an antelope. Since his wife Lydia had recently made fresh gooseberry sauce, perhaps they used it as a sauce for the fresh-cooked game.

Around several campfires the meat turned up in savory pies. "The crowning piece of the feast was a savory pie, made of sage hen and rabbit, with a rich gravy; the crust having been raised with yeast, was as light as a feather," recalled Phoebe Judson. Reminiscing about that day 50 years later, Judson wrote, "Not one of them is so vividly portrayed upon my mind as the one celebrated by the little band of adventurers, so far from civilization." Before going into the pie dough, the meat was fried, stewed or roasted. The juices and rendered fat made the gravy. Judson does not tell us what spices or vegetables she used, but one can imagine that she had some wild onions, salt and pepper.

Any food that was not used daily became noteworthy on the Fourth. Canned foods came in that category. Along with their freshly caught fish, the Sawyers had "canned vegetables . . . rice cakes and other little dishes." Randall Hewitt perked up the stew pot with canned tomatoes. In 1862 it was such a rare treat that Hewitt expounded on the merits of having canned tomatoes on the Fourth of July:

A fitting close of our patriotic demonstrations of the day was in having an addition to our bill of fare at supper, which almost raised that uniform meal to the dignity of a banquet. Among our commissary stores were two or three cans of tomatoes which had kept remarkably well; . . . two cans were opened, and their contents served in stew and soup. The company thought nothing ever tasted half so good. Taking surroundings into account with steady service of bacon and beans, this simple vegetable came very near being the de-



By placing hot coals on top of the lid and underneath the bottom of this iron pot, skilled cooks made fresh bread, savory pies and hot stews in the versatile Dutch ovens.

lightful change it was said to be, on that patriotic occasion. Perhaps it was the only time tomatoes were ever served as a course at a Fourth of July banquet.

Hewitt made a good assumption. Tomato-based entrees were not popular Fourth of July dishes. But at least one other family, the Royals, served "preserved tomatoes" at their celebration dinner.

The most elaborate dinner award surely goes to the women in the Conyers group, but the two ladies who baked desserts for the Washington City and California Mining Company deserve admiration for being the most overworked. They had mixed dough, rolled crusts and stewed fruit to make pies and puddings for 92 men.

NOT EVERYONE, of course, dined on decent pastry or ate savory pies. George Keller had to make do with "a Fourth of July dinner on musty hard bread, and beef bones in a state of *incipient putrefaction*," which he said was as "highly relished by us, as any of the more *sumptuous* repasts served up to our friends in the states." Amos Steck was less appreciative of his humble fare. He recorded in disgust that after having

"no other refreshment than hard Bread for dinner, and poor bread at that, [he] will feel little patriotic ardor stimulating him even on this Great Day." Steck had spent the day "driving a slow ox team in a sandy road, his eyes filled &

George Keller had to make do with "a Fourth of July dinner on musty hard bread, and beef bones in a state of *incipient putrefaction*."



his throat choked with it." Some diarists ignored the day and presumably dined on ordinary fare.

A Little Too Much Firewater

"OF COURSE, it was a matter of mathematical certainty that some of us would get 'glorious' upon the 'Glorious



Howard Giske photo, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle



The back of the covered wagon became a handy makeshift kitchen worktable.



Fourth,' and most gloriously were all such patriotic resolutions carried out," Matthew Field, wrote to his paper, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*. For large numbers of weary travelers, no Fourth of July was complete without copious toasts accompanied with appropriate beverages.

DRINKING WAS not confined to holidays, but on the Fourth one did not need the excuse of ill health. Many took advantage of the national day and joined in the toasts and merrymaking. "This being the 4th of July the men must needs show their 'independence'; and such another drunken, crazy, hooting, quarreling fighting frolic I seldom

witnessed," stated Jason Lee, a missionary. The drinking activity was repeated by quite a few men in celebrations along the Platte River Road. Charles Stanton, in a letter to his brother, acknowledged his overindulgence:

Yesterday, as I said before, we celebrated the 4th of July. The breaking [off] one or two bottles of good liquor, which had been hid to prevent a few old tapsters from stealing, (so thirsty do they become on this route for liquor of any kind, that the stealing of it is thought no crime), . . . song and toast created one of the most pleasurable excitements we have had on the road."

Enoch Conyers made no excuses for too much "firewater" when he described how the men had to prop up their chosen speaker. Either the alcohol had no effect on his oratorical skills or else everyone had had too much.

The question came up: To whom should the honor be given to deliver the oration? This honor fell to the lot of Virgil J. N. Ralston. . . . Unfortunately he, with several other young men of our company, went this morning to the Devil's Gate, where they obtained a little too much "firewater," and by the time they reached the camp were considerably under its influence. But this was the glorious old Fourth, therefore the oration we must have. . . . Several of the boys gathered around Virgil, lifting him bodily upon the end of one of our long tables, where they steadied him until he became sufficiently braced up, and then let go of him. He spoke for over half an hour, and delivered, off-hand, an excellent oration.

Not everyone, of course, got drunk. Some really did just drink a toast. Virginia Reed, a 13-year-old who was one of the survivors of the Donner party, wrote about the day:

We selabrated the 4 of July on plat at Bever crik several of the Gentemen in Springfield gave paw a botel of licker and said it shoulnden be opend till the 4 day of July and paw was to look to the east and drink it and they was to look to the West an drink it at 12 o'clock paw treted the company and we all had some lemminade, maw and paw is well.

As they settled in their new homes, the pioneers kept the spirit of the Glorious Fourth. The holiday remained a celebration of patriotism and a connection to those back home. As John Adams predicted, noise and dressing up, a display of the flag, and brilliant and boring orations are "celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary Festival."

Jacqueline Williams is a free-lance food writer/educator and co-author of four cookbooks. This article is excerpted from Wagon Wheel Kitchens: Food on the Oregon Trail, University Press of Kansas (1993).

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COLUMBIA

THE MAGAZINE OF NORTHWEST HISTORY ■ SUMMER 1995

From the Editor 2

History Commentary 3

The university press bandwagon rolls on into a "brave new world."

By Keith C. Petersen

The Glorious Fourth 4

Independence Day festivities on the Oregon Trail.

By Jacqueline Williams

The Overland Trail 9

Historic traces in the modern American landscape—a photo essay.

By Greg MacGregor

From the Collection 13

The diary of an 1860s overland trail emigrant.

The First Death of Horse Racing 14

Big Brother wrote "blue laws" in 1909.

By Paul Spitzer

The Desert Years 21

Drought and depression took an enormous toll on wheat farmers in eastern Washington's Big Bend country.

By Edward C. Whitley

Swing the Door Wide 26

The World War II economy opened the job market for blacks in the Pacific Northwest.

By Quintard Taylor

A Victorian Odyssey 33

The tragic tale of two Spokane women who gambled for high stakes and lost more than they bargained for.

By Linda Lawrence Hunt

Shipwreck & Promises 41

One set of historic events from two very different perspectives.

By Robert E. Steiner

Correspondence/Additional Reading 45

Columbia Reviews 46

Recent books of interest in Northwest history.

Edited by Robert C. Carriker

COVER: During the quarter century when horse race gambling lay outside the law, horses ran and several tracks, such as Puyallup's, remained open. The termination of legal gambling in 1909 meant that these horses ran for the exercise—at least ostensibly. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society) See story starting on page 14.