

Back in the day

Recipes and memories

Jerry Apps

Editor's note: A well-worn Depression-era recipe box was the inspiration for the latest book by Jerry Apps, who wrote "Old Farm Country Cookbook: Recipes, Menus and Memories" with his daughter, Susan Apps-Bodilly, and recipe-testing help from his wife, Ruth Apps, a home economist. The book, from Wisconsin Historical Society Press, features recipes from Eleanor Apps, Jerry's mother and Susan's grandmother, along with Jerry's memories of growing up on the family dairy farm in central Wisconsin in the 1930s and '40s.

The 300-page paperback volume includes cheerful chapters and related recipes on everything from "The Home Orchard" to "Hunting for Game," holiday gatherings, housewarmings, canning, kitchen gardens and "Ma's Strawberry Patch" — even a tale about exploding bottles of fermented grapes. Following is an excerpt from Chapter 12, "Fishing in Summer and Winter."

Tales from the ice

Farm work kept us so busy in summer that we fished only a few times during those months. But we loved fishing, and we always had our cane fishing poles at the ready, tucked up under the eaves of the corncrib where they would be out of the weather but retrievable with the first hint that fishing was a possibility.

Summer fishing was more fun than a necessity. But Pa took ice fishing more seriously, as winter-caught fish were a major supplement to our meat supply. Not that ice fishing wasn't fun, as long as you dressed for it, had a more than average amount of patience, didn't mind sitting by a smoky campfire and could put up with nonstop storytelling. All of the above were integral parts of ice fishing when I was a kid.

Mount Morris was our favorite lake for ice fishing. It was relatively shallow, with a goodly population of northern pike along with bluegills, sunfish, bass and perch, and it featured a wooded area on the west side where we could build a campfire, hoping a bluegill might bite. (Mostly they didn't.)

What we really wanted were northern pike. The bag limit was five pike per person per day. We usually did not catch our limit, for that would mean 20 fish for me, Pa and my brothers. But we did sometimes return home with 10 pike, ranging from two to three pounds to five pounds or more.

We fished most days during Christmas break, and on winter weekends when school was in session. Ma packed a lunch for us, and we were off to the lake. We usually arrived at the lake by 10 or so, after the barn chores were finished.

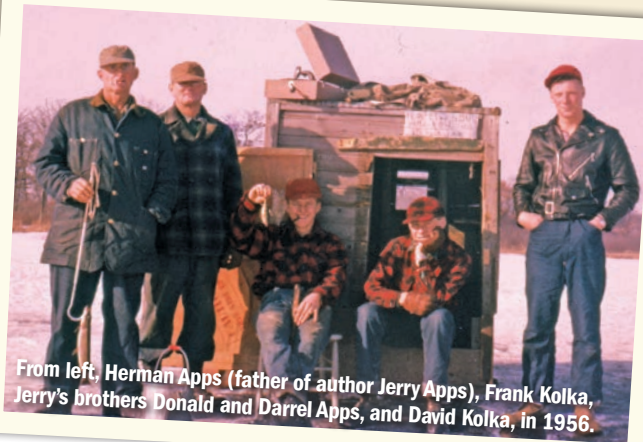
At noon we opened our lunch pails, dug out our sandwiches and toasted them over our smoky campfire. The sandwiches were often cheese, which would melt just a bit, or

perhaps bologna, which tasted so much better when it was roasted a bit over the fire. Crisp apples and Ma's homemade chocolate chip cookies rounded out the noon meal.

Winter days are short, so by 4 in the afternoon it was already becoming dark as we headed for the car with our day's catch. Back home, we cleaned our fish. The common way of preparing northern pike for cooking is to fillet them, meaning you cut strips of the meat away from the backbone and skin the fish before cooking it, but Pa did not believe in filleting fish — he said it wasted too much meat.

Instead we scaled them (leaving on the skin), cut off the heads and removed the entrails, and then cut the fish into pieces about 2 inches thick. (To those who might complain about bones left in the fish, Pa had no answer other than telling them to eat around the bones.) Ma prepared pike in a variety of ways, including frying and baking. Pa also pickled northern pike to preserve it — a process that caused the unwelcome bones to disintegrate. ❧

Jerry Apps has been a rural historian and environmental writer for more than 40 years; he is a former county extension agent and a UW-Madison professor emeritus. Susan Apps-Bodilly is a teacher and author of "One Room Schools: Stories from the Days of 1 Room, 1 Teacher, 8 Grades."



From left, Herman Apps (father of author Jerry Apps), Frank Kolka, Jerry's brothers Donald and Darrel Apps, and David Kolka, in 1956.

APPS FAMILY PHOTO

>>> COOKING CONNECTS GENERATIONS



My grandma Eleanor Apps' white wooden box, with a hinged lid that flips up, holds recipe cards. They are simple lined index cards, scraps of paper or little pieces of cardboard. On the cards are recipes for cakes and cookies, salads and breads, written with blue ink in her cursive handwriting. I never actually saw my grandma cook with a recipe card. Most of her cards have no directions at all, just lists of ingredients. I imagine she simply knew how to cook and used the cards to jog her memory. Why would I attempt to cook the way she did when my father and his twin brothers were young? When I follow her recipes, I remember her; I connect with her way of life in the kitchen. For this cookbook, I rewrote her recipes for cooks in today's kitchen, adding oven temperatures and pan sizes and clarifying, where I could, the language of the era.

I have cooked or baked most of the recipes in this book. (I decided not to fry up a squirrel!) I did so to honor my grandma and all the women who worked in the kitchen for their families. I use these recipe cards, I listen to my father's stories, and I remember my grandma. She is still here. I remember her through this white wooden box of recipes.

— Susan Apps-Bodilly

Pickled fish

These are the directions as they were written on Eleanor's recipe card:

Clean fish. Cut into pieces. Soak in salt water, 1 cup of salt in 1 quart of water, for 24 hours.

Drain the fish and rinse. Soak in clear vinegar for 24 hours. Save the vinegar for brine.

Boil 9 cups of vinegar, 2 cups of water and 1 cup of sugar and 2 tablespoons of pickling spice.

Pour this over fish and pieces of onions. Ready to eat in 24 hours.