

## WOMEN AND THEIR HOMES - PART I

I have always wondered what the women of early Indiana would have to share with us about their lives as settlers and pioneers.

Knowing that one of their duties as wife and mother was to prepare the meals for the family, consider for a moment what this must have been like. There were no freezers or refrigerators from which to remove the meals of the day. There were no canned goods from the store. There was no bread which came in a plastic wrap. In fact there was nothing outside of what the family grew, prepared, or killed themselves.

The early pioneers could not have remained very long if it had not been for the abundance of game of all kinds in the forests. Often, for weeks at a time, they had no other food than deer, bear, and wild turkey meat. Some did plan around a meal of rabbit or squirrel for they too were quite plentiful.

With all of this they then frequently used a substitute for bread of roasted acorns, pounding the mixture into as meal, of which they made cakes. This was very coarse fare, but the pioneer families subsisted very well on such diet until they could raise a patch of their own corn. Hard labor furnished ravenous appetites, and dyspepsia and other stomach troubles were unknown.

There were a surprising number of methods of cooking that were used. Cooking stoves did not come into use until about 1820 and even as late as 1835 the large majority of families prepared their foods in the old fashioned way.

In the early days, utensils were not plentiful. The settlers came a long way over mountains from the various states, in rough wagons and carts, on horseback, or even on foot. Consequently it was difficult to bring many dishes or utensils. Many of the poorer immigrants had but a single skillet in their cabins. A story which an older pioneer relates was that when she was a grown woman there was not more than one vessel for cooking in any home in the neighborhood and that one was nearly always a skillet with the lid. Some made with their own hands rough pots of clay, which served until they could get iron ones. These crude pots were not glazed, so that when meat was cooked the grease came through the pores, and the outside of the pot was continually afire.

In the more comfortable homes the cooking was done in large kettles hung with pothooks from an iron crane over the great fire in the fireplace. Meat was cooked in a long handled frying pan, which was held over the blaze by hand or set down upon coals drawn out upon the hearth.

This pan was also used for baking pancakes, sometimes called "flap-jacks" and bread, too, was frequently made on it. Johnny cake was baked on a board made for this purpose, about ten inches wide and fifteen inches long and rounded at the top. The thick corn dough was placed on the board which was set against a chunk of wood near the fire. After one side had been basked to a nice brown, the other side was treated in the same way. The resulting cake was often delicious. If a Johnny cake board was not at hand, a hoe, without a handle, was cleaned and greased with bear's oil. The dough was baked on this metal

surface and was called a hoe-cake. If neither a Johnny cake board nor a hoe was to be had, the dough was wrapped in cabbage leaves or fresh cornshucks, laid in a clean place on the hearth, and covered with live embers, which thoroughly baked it. This was called an ash cake.

A better article for baking was a covered skillet called a "spider." This utensil stood upon feet and was heated over the hearth with hickory coals piled over and under it; no flame was suffered to blaze around the skillet. The more prosperous families used the Dutch oven for baking, especially in the summer time. This was made of bricks and mortar, or small boulders, or even tough clay, wrought and beaten into shape, and burned by slow fires built inside. It was usually set upon a wooden platform away from the house because of the danger of fires, and was protected by a shed. In shape it appeared much like a round dome, resembling considerably the old time bee-hive. After the oven was thoroughly heated, the fire was raked out and the bread and pies set upon the floor, the body of the oven retaining enough heat to do the cooking.

The chief articles of diet in the early days were cornbread and hominy; venison, wild turkey, squirrel, and other wild game; duck and chicken; honey, beans, pumpkin (dried for more than half the year), potatoes, and other vegetables. In the early times, sweets, pastries, and biscuits were luxuries which were served only on Sundays. A travelling circuit judge described a limited fare: "Three articles of diet, only, appeared on the plain walnut table, corn dodgers, boiled squirrel, and sassafras tea." But the later pioneer had many delicacies. Potpies, jellies, pies, custards, pound cakes, and preserves were not strange to his palate, in addition to the more substantial foods. On Sundays and feast-days his table fairly groaned with good things.

In closing, I ask you to think about what your great-grandmothers or perhaps great-great-grandmothers endured as pioneers and settlers. Ask yourself—would I have wanted to live during those times?

(To be continued in next article)

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