

## Food extras

I was only eight years old at the end of the war in the spring of 1945, and of course accepted things pretty much as they were without questioning, not having known anything else and not having any eventful experiences out in the country, away for all practical purposes from the war. But I do know that all food was strictly rationed, but I also know that we never went hungry, and also that the diet, mainly vegetables with relatively little meat, did not hurt us, for my parents both stayed healthy up into their 90's.

I do not know how the ration cards were distributed or how often, but I do remember they were a small card where the butcher, or whoever, would cut out a stamp, and I suppose somehow account for what he did with whatever goods one got. I know we were rationed to very little meat and eggs, almost no fat or sugar, and very little of everything else. Potatoes and bread was rationed, but I am pretty sure vegetables were not, at least where we lived, for there was really no place to buy them, one would just raise them or use whatever one had to trade for them. For us at least, I do not remember my parents ever buying any vegetables. Everything came out of the garden.

I do, however, remember my mother now and then working in the fields for some of the small farmers at harvest time. What I was not told at the time was that she was earning a few extra potatoes or sometimes a little milk or maybe some eggs outside the official rationing system. Such things were of course illegal, but then people will do anything to feed their family if they are hungry.

One of the free delicacies was the local nettles that tasted about like spinach, except better. They were a perennial that tended to grow around fences, particularly if the soil was good. It was sort of like east Texas poke salad, another wild weed that is quite delicious if harvested early in the spring and properly prepared, except that our nettles were of the stinging type, but nothing like Texas bull nettles.

Another freebie was dandelion in the spring and other weeds that I can no longer name. It seemed that we could name everything that grew along the roads, and I do believe that the variety of vegetation certainly was less than it is here in more southerly Texas. One of the theories I have heard is that it stemmed from the ice ages in Germany when nature was pushed south and had no further to retreat when things got to the Alps, but whether such is true I do not know, but it sounds plausible. But then lots of things we were told at that time sounded plausible in the political climate of the time, including the potato beetle being the "English beetle" and polio being the "English disease", but we certainly had no "German measles", just measles.

I remember us making starch out of potatoes. First the potatoes would be peeled, then ground up into a mash and sloshed and stirred in buckets. Water was added to make a real slushy mess. Starch, about a half inch thick would settle out at the bottom. The mash would be strained and used to make potato pancakes, sort of like hashed browns, except that we had no fat or oil to keep it from sticking in the pan. What we would do is take an onion, cut it in half, stick a fork into it, and rub it onto the skillet, with maybe just a little

bit of fat on it, and it would do a pretty good job of keeping things from sticking, maybe. It would also be turned into potato balls maybe two inches in diameter, which would wind up in vegetable soup made from who knows what all stuff. The potato balls would also wind up in some kind of fruit soup dessert such as plums, cherries, or who knows what. Nothing was wasted. The original potato peelings, very thin, would go to the geese and rabbits we were keeping.

Another ritual was making molasses to take the place of the non available sugar, and did we make molasses. Potatoes and animal feed beets, and maybe a little rye grain was the staple crop in the area, but sugar beets also grew but as I only learned later they had to be sort of snuck in by the farmers hidden somewhere off to the side to get around the rationing system. We may have grown a few in the garden, but I believe we somehow traded for them. The beets were cleaned, cut into pieces, cooked I believe, then turned into a pulp and the sweet juice drained off. It would all be done in the cellar in the big kettle that was normally used for boiling the wash. There was of course no washing, and washing meant stirring the wash with a big paddle while feeding the dried peat into the firebox surrounding it.

Anyhow molasses making was done all night long, with the cellar windows all covered up with whatever one had. Covering the windows at night was nothing unusual, as all windows had to be covered at night if there was any light in that room so that the nighttime bombers would not be able to find their way, at least so we were told. It all seemed so normal. We were of course not supposed to be making molasses, not with rationing around, but then I guess everybody more or less did it. Even the authorities more or less closed their eyes to it.

The trick with the molasses was to slowly boil the excess water off without it becoming black and tasting burnt. All of our molasses was always thick, dark, and somewhat burnt, but I guess that was just the molasses taste we got used to. The whole operation had to be finished by early morning.

Another operation was making oil out of poppy seeds. We must have grown the poppy in the garden for I cannot imagine having bought it, not with food rationing around. Poppy is of course a pretty flower but it also makes a big pod with lots of loose small seeds in them. The seeds would somehow be squeezed through a grinder with the oil dripping out of it. I believe the seeds were squeezed raw, but the left over poppy cake would make a filling for some sort of poppy cake. Again, nothing was wasted, but I am sure we would all have tested positive.

We also tried drying fruit but without much success because most of the time the weather would not be dry or warm enough. Anyway we tried it with green beans, carrots, and apples, all carefully sliced very thin by hand. I only remember trying it once, so it must not have worked so good. I guess it worked out better to do some canning, let the beans and English peas dry, and keep the carrots and apples in the cool cellar.

Then there was also the berry season in the "Dragen", the large public forest that started just across the railroad tracks. It was mainly cultivated pines at all stages of growth and with the whole area being more or less moist all year long, there were large areas of a type of blueberry, though not as large, both the plant, nor the berries, as what think of as blueberries. The problem was that with all the puddles and ditches around, the Dragen was also a mosquito haven. There were huge clouds of mosquitoes at berry time, although at other times of the year they were not a problem at all. I hated going blueberry picking. We of course had no mosquito sprays.

A more pleasant food gathering activity was going by bicycle to the nearby village of Westerbeck, about four miles away, hunting for mushrooms. We would go past the elementary school, through the shanties on either side of the dirt road "main street", then follow the shuttle spur that went to the insulation pane factory. There was always something magical about that area, with the lush meadows surrounded by the ever present birch trees with their distinctive splotched black and white bark. We would always see water type birds somewhat like a kildee except larger, and now and then a stork. The whole area would be entirely unlike Triangel.

Westerbeck was sandy, completely unlike Triangel with its dark peat rich soil. No pines as in the Dragen, but mainly birches and other hardwoods. It was an old village with wood and stucco type farmsteads along a winding paved road going out to somewhere. As soon as we would ride out of the small village, the whole area was not cultivated as intensely as around Triangel, and there would be rotting debris under and around the trees if one got off the beaten path just a little bit, and my parents seemed to know where to go.

Mushrooms of course can be deadly if one does not know what to avoid, but it seems like everybody knew what to eat and what to stay away from, and there were mushrooms of every type and form if one had learned where to look. There was a very small tasty yellow type of irregular form that would grow under and on the sides of rotting logs. Then there was the classic red cap fairy type mushroom with splotches of white on it, except that there were two types, one poisonous, the other one not, but by looking underneath the top hat, at the "gills", one could tell them apart. Another two mushrooms could be told apart by carefully cutting a thin slice and tasting it. The prize mushroom was a large solid brown type that went by the name of "Steinpilz" ("Stein"=stone, "Pilz"=mushroom), and it really looked like a large brown stone, but we rarely found any. We were of course not the only ones hunting mushrooms, but my parents seemed to know when to go mushroom hunting. Mushrooms of course are not out all the time, coming out mainly in flushes after rains following a somewhat period of dry. Maybe that is why the Dragen was not good for mushroom hunting with everything more or less moist all the time. Maybe it was too acid.

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One would think that out in the country one would be able to raise chickens or some other animals for a little extra meat, but such was generally not the case. As I learned later it was because most animals eat more or less the same food as people eat. Chicken

and pigs eat grain, which can feed more people than if fed to the animal, and then eating the animals. The farmers would of course keep some chickens for eggs, and some pigs and cows for milk and also draft animals, but they were strictly required to turn their products over to go into the general food distribution system.

Geese was one type of animal one was allowed to keep, since those can get by pretty much just eating grass, but even their numbers were restricted to one per person, and each spring a few goslings would appear, to be carefully babied and promptly turned into pets, at least for I while. I remember making little wagons and little harnesses for the geese, but they would pretty much panic. I guess geese just do not have a big enough brain to be trained, and I also never have seen one have a nightmare like a smarter animal like a dog. Then in the fall the geese, one after another would wind up on the dinner table. We of course had no such thing as an ice box or a freezer.

Another exception, and the one that really fed us, was rabbits. There was no limit on the number one could raise, or that rabbits can multiply, and we had lots of rabbits, in at least ten huts, with rabbits on three levels, with at least half a dozen in each pen, rabbits of all sizes and ages. In the fall they would be moved into the cellar under the house, although we did not keep that many through the winter, mainly just enough to start another rabbit explosion outdoors in the spring. Rabbits properly prepared are delicious, particularly if one is hungry, but then again one would now and then like to eat something other than rabbit, but there was very little of any other kind of meat.