

North Dakota Country School

Electronic mail message from James Gessele, Minneapolis, Minnesota, native of Mercer, North Dakota, 28 February 2017

I did not personally have to undergo what I describe below. Instead I got an earful from my parents who did "suffer" a spartan diet at noon in a 1920s-1930s central North Dakota Country School.

There was no fresh fruit such as apples or oranges. That was a treat reserved for Christmas. At best in winter months there were home canned peaches and pears that Grandma splurged on at the grocery store come July and August. Plums and chokecherries grew in the garden orchard and those were canned for winter consumption. There were fresh vegetables such as carrots but only at school opening in September at the end of the vegetable growing season. What they did have in abundance were hard-boiled eggs, smoked side pork and slabs of crusty homemade bread with lots of butter slathered on it. To drink there was skim milk - none of the whole milk variety. That had to be run through the separator and the cream hauled to town on Saturday evenings to be sold in order for Grandma to purchase food staples. The school diet (and the home menu as well) was full of fats. There may have been occasional cookies but hardly anyone could afford sugar during the Great Depression.

Electronic email message from Connie Dahlke, Walla Walla, Washington, 28 February 2017

In 2004, Mineard Stolz told me the following about what he took to school (in the 1930s) in his "syrup pail" lunchbox:

"For our school lunches we generally had sandwiches with peanut-butter mixed with Karo syrup. The empty Karo syrup tins were used for lunch pails. I remember walking to school with my Karo lunch pail with my sandwiches in it. Sometimes we had sandwiches of bread sprinkled with a mixture of sugar and cocoa, or spread with butter and sometimes jelly - I remember the chokecherry jelly. We didn't have access to much fruit. Mother made all of our bread."

He also said: "Supper was our main meal, with fried chicken, or sausage (smoke-cured or canned), or some kind of roast beef or other meat. Mother would slice raw potatoes and fry them with onions or sometimes we had mashed potatoes." Mineard spoke of his mother making strudles or dumplings cooked on top of potatoes in a pan with a tight-fitting lid. He also listed the usual garden vegetables that his mother grew - these were often used in soup.

We must remember that for a lunch while doing field work, the Germans in Russia were dedicated to eating bread with a piece of meat-fat (or fatty meat). They felt that the fat gave them strength and energy for hard work. They had little knowledge of nutrition, and for a lunch we would be disappointed in their unbalanced, low-nutrition choices!

Cookies were not every-day fare - these were made for holidays, especially at Christmas time. Fruit was a rare luxury.

I have attached a schoolroom photo that was in my grandmother's photo album. I suspect that this is a photo of the school room she attended. This would have been taken in Logan County (in the area of "The Flat"), North Dakota around 1908.