



PAF Express

*Washington County PAF Users Group
From October 2005 Newsletter*

Tasteful Family History

Family Chronicle – September/October 2005

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Suggests using your "noodle" when researching family history in the kitchen. Go AND GRAB your recipe box. Thumb through it. See anything of genealogical value in there? No? Maybe you should look again.

Recipe boxes can be a gold mine of information, especially if you're looking at your mother's or grandmother's collection of recipes. Recipes are often written not only on lined index cards, but also on deposit slips, scratch pads, envelopes, even bills. Deposit slips will give information about where a family lived, and may provide another place to research that you may not have even known about. Bills and envelopes will be dated, and the bills will give you interesting information about the price of things in a given time. Bills, also, will tell you where and when your family lived, and may even give clues about lifestyle – did the family shop at Woolworths or Marshall?Fields (or some other high-end store)? Sometimes there are letters tucked inside with recipes someone requested. Those letters often contain all kinds of information, and offer a snapshot of the lives involved.

In my paternal grandmother's box, there are recipes from friends of my grandmother from when they lived in Illinois (my grandparents retired to Mississippi), and one written on a notepad bore the logo and address of the car dealership at which my grandfather worked. There's a recipe marked "Aunt Callie's Fruit Cake", Aunt Callie being her mother's sister, my great-aunt. Further, there is a notation that "Granny" used Crisco instead of butter or margarine. There was a recipe entitled "Hazel's Lime Pickles" and Hazel was the name of her mother-in-law. There are recipes written in my grandmother's hand and in the hand of her younger daughter, when she was a child. Those handwriting samples could be useful in determining the author of other documents.

The recipes themselves may share an ethnic culture that has since been absorbed by a more generic "American" identity. Things that some might take for granted to a genealogist may be an expression of their family's cultural heritage. Recipes also offer clues into the lives and life-styles of different generations. There may be recipes that helped sustain the family through the difficult times of the Depression. There will almost certainly be gelatin recipes that were ubiquitous for a generation of homemakers.

If you aren't fortunate enough to possess an ancestor's collection, you can ask other family members if they, or know who might, have those treasured recipes. If you can persuade someone to let you borrow the collection, scan all the contents into your computer (no less than 300 dpi) and take a photograph of the box itself. Take notes about what you find, and document everything, even if it seems obvious to you. If you don't know who "Rosie" was, ask a family member. It might turn out to be another relative, or a close family friend. Just because I know who Callie was, doesn't mean my descendants will, unless I document it.

Here is an example of the sort of things that contain clues in a recipe box:

A recipe for Mustard Pickles was included in a letter. It is dated "Thursday, September 5, 1935"; it is written with a fountain pen. In addition to the recipe, the author talks about a trip taken to Bagnell Dam [in Missouri], that Harry [the author's husband?] is going to the doctor, and may be admitted to a veteran's hospital: "Jefferson B." [probably Jefferson Barracks, in St. Louis]. She goes on to invite Julia and "all" down for a picnic in the yard. Knowing that Harry was a veteran could be an important clue for someone researching this family.

If you borrow recipes either to scan or to hand-copy, you should also make a record of what you're borrowing, its physical description as well as a description of the contents. You are essentially researching, and you should cite your sources. On the CDs that contain the scans of my Grandma Boughner's recipes, there are two documents, an index and notes. The index contains a list of all the recipes and the name of the image. With every image, I give the name of the recipe (or recipes), and indicate the format of the recipe, whether it is handwritten, a newspaper clipping, or from packaging. The notes contain information about who has possession of the recipes, when they were scanned, etc. So the next time you get an opportunity to go through a family member's recipes, take it, and look at those slips of paper and stained index cards with new eyes. You never know what clues you may find, but you won't find any if you don't look. At the very least, you could find that recipe you've been meaning to ask for. Happy hunting!

Wendy is the author of the book - *Creating an Heirloom: Writing Your Family's Cookbook*.
Learn more at ED www.CreatingAnHeirloom.com