

WAGON WHEEL
KITCHENS
Food on the
Oregon Trail

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THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

"We hoisted a flag belonging to some of the company, and as we saw the stars and stripes floating in the breeze we felt quite patriotic."

Colorful firecrackers did not explode over the plains. Picnic baskets filled with fried chicken, hot dogs, and potato salad did not miraculously appear by the campfire when the emigrants paid tribute to Independence Day. But the Fourth of July was celebrated with special foods, toasts of good cheer, and guns "bursting in air" up and down the Platte and Sweetwater rivers. On the glorious Fourth, emigrants "felt quite patriotic."

They were simply joining with the rest of the country in affirming the spirit of nationalism. The celebration reminded the pioneers of their links to their old homes and helped them to renew their vows of carrying American ideas and aspirations to the West. In a show of patriotism an unidentified correspondent wrote a letter to a St. Joseph newspaper:

Although we occupy an obscure corner in the moral vineyard, and do not often hear of the ballance of the world, nor it of us, we know how to celebrate this day of days to American Citizens and to appreciate the spilt blood and sleeping ashes of our Fathers.²

THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

The idea of a celebration in the midst of such difficult travel is so distinctively American, so much a part of the overlanders outlook, that it is fitting to treat this unique day in detail. How amazing it is that the travelers, weary from at least two months of peregrinations across the continent, still had the energy to throw a party. A close look at the preparations for the celebration and at the ingredients that were stirred and mixed into cakes, puddings, and even ice cream of the Fourth of July completes the picture of the baking, broiling, and eating that took place on the Oregon-California Trail.

AT THE ROCK

Whenever possible, overlanders tried to celebrate the Fourth in the vicinity of Independence Rock in central Wyoming. Supposedly, the rock was named by the early trappers who had first celebrated at that spot, although which trappers and in what year are subjects of much conjecture. Tom Fitzpatrick, Col. William L. Sublette, and the American Fur Company are contenders for the title of who named the rock in either 1824, 1829, or 1830; the answer depends upon which diary account a reader chooses to believe.³ For the emigrants, inscribing their names on the large monolith became an established ritual.

The grand rock standing so tall and strong was a great curiosity to the emigrants; there was nothing like it at home. Merrill Mattes, in a study of 100 of the best-known journals and guidebooks representing the years 1830-1866, writes that 65 percent of the diarists mentioned Independence Rock.⁴ Peter Decker's and Elisha Perkins's descriptions are typical:

Indeed a curiosity in its way 600 yds long & 20 yds wide & some 100 feet high of solid grey granite—

primitive rock rising from the level plain, fine grass & pretty flowers grow at the foot in abundance. Many names inscribed on it of which I saw that of my friend M. N. Wambaugh of California.⁵

Ind. Rock is a huge mass of smooth stone oval, some 1/2 mile long or more rising abruptly out of the plain & standing entirely alone though a little beyond commences the Rocky Mountain range in full view. The greatest attraction & curiosity of Ind. Rock however is the vast number of names inscribed upon it. Being very smooth it makes a fine intelligence board & thousands upon thousands of names are thickly inscribed in large letters on the two sides round which the road winds. . . . Hardly anyone passes without leaving his mark with tar or charcoal.⁶

A YOUNG NATION

In 1851 the country was celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of its independence. No doubt a few of the emigrants had grown up with family members who had fought in the War for Independence and who remembered when Congress declared the nation free from Great Britain in 1776. A few of these early citizens might even have recalled that the vote for independence was approved on July 2 but that Congress needed two extra days to debate the wording of the declaration and to formalize the resolution. John Adams had written to his wife, "The second day of July, 1776, will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary Festival." But it was July 4 of course that became the official birthday of the new country.

In his letter to Abigail, John Adams established the guidelines for Fourth of July celebrations:

It ought to be commemorated, as the day of deliverance, by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward, forevermore.

The first national-holiday celebration took place in Philadelphia on July 8, 1776. The people followed Adams's guidelines and paraded, fired guns, rang bells, and made a bonfire by burning the king's heraldic arms, a painted banner hanging on the state house (they removed the banner before lighting the fire). A year later, on the first anniversary, fireworks were added to the celebration, and the ships in the Philadelphia harbor fired thirteen guns in honor of the colonies. Loud noises, illuminations, thirteen-gun-salutes, and thirteen toasts were common features of the day as the people rejoiced over their new independence.

When John Adams predicted that the holiday would be celebrated with illuminations he was referring to the old-fashioned custom of illuminating buildings and public plazas by placing candles in windows or even atop walls and along public thoroughfares. Fireworks, although a part of the first anniversary celebration, did not become a tradition until the first decade of the nineteenth century. Fireworks were expensive and required advance planning; the war had left the cities poor, and celebrations were unplanned affairs. Yet even though firecrackers were not available, guns were, and exploding shells became a prominent feature of the Fourth. Overlanders continued this tradition.

As on most holidays, an exceptional dinner became

part of the tradition of the Fourth. In the early days, after the men paraded and the guns were fired, the participants marched to a public dinner, prepared by a local tavern-keeper and generally served outside. Only men attended; politics were considered to be of no concern to the women.⁹ Ale, cider, wine, rum, or whiskey flowed as everyone toasted the union; drinking too much was accepted.

As the cities grew, one tavernkeeper could no longer prepare all the public dinners, so celebrants hosted private parties. Political parties quickly realized that these events presented a perfect occasion for telling why their candidates should be elected, and political speeches were added to the festivities. The elaborate dinners became picnics, with women and children attending, and the traditions established continue to this day. In a boost for this type of entertainment an editorial in the *St. Louis Missouri Republican*, July 4, 1855, stated:

We confess a liking for the old fashioned style of celebrating the Fourth of July—an oration—a march to a grove—a dinner with sentiments and the etceteras. Fire-works have no particular charm. A mental-treat, even though the subject be considered a hackneyed one, is far better than all the glare and glitter and bluster and noise that can be made.

“THE BEST WE COULD PROVIDE”

Just as family and friends at home varied the dishes in the picnic basket, so did the emigrants. From cornstarch cakes to an elaborate several-course meal, the holiday food depended on the tenacity of the cook and the supplies in the provision box. Even simple food such as the potato

could make the meal momentous. “Our dinner, in honor of the national anniversary, was the best we could provide. The last of our potatoes, which had long been saved for the occasion, made it a rare feast,” noted Margaret Frink.⁹

Harriet Loughary turned the usual provisions into Fourth of July gastronomic delights by making certain that the beans were baked instead of boiled and only half-cooked and that there would be “some warm bread instead of burned hoe cake.” The Loughary party also displayed the flag, shot their guns, and let the children have a picnic; theirs was a typical Fourth of July celebration:

The few stars and stripes were raised on top of our tents, a line of men drawn up, and a salute fired from a hundred little guns and pistols. Three cheers were lustily given for “Our Country,” “The Soldiers in the field” and last though not least “The Captains new Grand baby” . . . All had a “go as you please time” Some hunted or fished, others lounged around camp, while the children had a picnic under the bows of a large pine tree. Two more trains came up today and camp with us greatly enjoying our celebration.’

The hoecakes that Loughary did not intend to bake were a quick bread of flour (or often cornmeal) and water that was baked on the greased blade of a hoe set near the fire. *The Kentucky Housewife* gave specific directions for preparing the batter:

SHORT HOE CAKES

Rub two large spoonfuls of butter in a quart of flour till well incorporated, sprinkle in a salt-spoonful of salt, and make it into common biscuit paste or dough with cold sweet milk, knead it well, and roll it out

several times with a roller; then roll it into a sheet a quarter of an inch thick, cut it in oblong cakes, and bake them hastily on a hoe or griddle, having it neatly cleaned and rubbed with butter; turn them over once, and as soon as they are done, split and butter them, and eat them warm.¹⁰

Emigrant families, particularly those going to Oregon Territory, took hoes along with other farm implements that would be needed for planting gardens in their new homes. In those days of few markets people grew their own fruits and vegetables. For the emigrants who arrived in late autumn, spring-planting time could not come too soon.

Unlike most of the emigrants, Helen Carpenter did not feel that the day was "Independence Day" but just the same old jolts with plenty of dust thrown in." Reel, her husband, requested "Corn Starch," however. Carpenter, with her characteristic frankness, responded:

I had never heard of that being a 4th of July dish and further more I did not know to cook it. But he did "Just as Aunt Hannah used to." So I stood by and saw him burn his fingers and scorch the starch which when done was of the consistency of very thin gravy. But we ate it, for on a trip like this one must not be too particular.¹¹

Helen Carpenter might not have considered cornstarch a holiday food, but nothing was more appropriate for the Fourth than corn. Native American cuisine included a variety of corn recipes long before that golden grain was introduced to the new European settlers. The popular cornpone comes from an Algonquian word meaning corn cooked as a thin layer of batter on a heated stone.

Reel Carpenter may not have been trying to imitate that dish, but it sounds as if he ended up with the precooked version. If the Carpenters were using real cornstarch, which Helen had included in her list of supplies, the "thin gravy" should have hardened as it cooled. When mixed with water and heated, starch granules burst and form a viscous, jellylike liquid that becomes firm when cooled.¹²

In 1857, the year the Carpenters traveled west, the Glenn Cove Starch Works of Long Island, New York, manufactured a starch product, Maizena, that was suitable for cooking:

[Maizena is] composed of the flour of the choicest selected white corn, and is the most wholesome, nutritious, and agreeable article of food in the whole range of farinaceous substances; it is not only a choice article of dessert, but in the sick room an excellent substitute for the best Bermuda Arrowroot, being used in the same way.¹³

In 1857, processing starch from corn was a relatively new industry in the United States, introduced in 1841 by an Englishman, Orlando Jones. Prior to this new process, starch was processed from wheat.

Distinctive foods were only a part of William Swain's Fourth of July party. His group honored the day with speeches, songs, and numerous toasts:

We lay abed late this morn. After a late breakfast, we set about getting fuel for cooking our celebration dinner.

Our celebration of the day was very good, much better than I anticipated. . . . At twelve o'clock we formed a procession and walked under our national

flag to the stand to the tune of "The Star Spangled Banner." The president of the day called the meeting to order. We listened to a prayer by Rev. Mr. Hobart, then remarks and the reading of the Declaration of Independence.

We then marched to the "hall," which was formed by running the wagons in two rows close enough together for the wagon covers to reach from one to the other, thus forming a fine hall roofed by the covers and a comfortable place for the dinner table, which was set down the center.

Dinner consisted of: ham; beans, boiled and baked; biscuits; john cake; apple pie; sweet cake; rice pudding; pickles; vinegar; pepper sauce and mustard; coffee; sugar; and milk. All enjoyed it well.

After dinner the toasting commenced. The boys had raked and scraped together all the brandy they could, and they toasted, hurried, and drank till reason was out and brandy was in. I stayed till the five regular toasts were drunk; and then, being disgusted with their conduct, I went to our tent, took my pen, and occupied the remainder of the day in writing to my wife.⁴

The "john cake" or johnnycake that was part of Swain's celebration is another type of flat cake made from corn. The name comes from journeycake and was so named because cornmeal cakes could be easily baked on a hot stone or flat griddle and kept well on journeys. Frequently they were baked like hoecakes, and the names were interchangeable. The first printed recipe for johnnycakes appeared in *American Cookery*, the earliest cookbook written by an American and published in America.

JOHNNY CAKE OR HOE CAKE

Scald 1 pint of milk and put to 3 pints of indian meal, and half pint of flower—bake before the fire. Or scald with milk two thirds of the indian meal, or wet two thirds with boiling water, add salt, molasses and shortening, work up with cold water pretty stiff, and bake as above.¹⁶

"QUITE A NUMBER OF KINDS OF CAKES"

The custom of eating cakes on the Fourth may have started with Capt. John Frémont, the noted explorer and the author of a popular guidebook for the Platte River Road. On July 4, 1842, Frémont's friends in St. Louis provided him with a "large supply of excellent preserves and rich fruit-cake."¹⁷ He thus procured his cake the easy way, but those travelers who followed him baked their own. Frémont's cook did not worry about having the right ingredients. St. Louis was already a busy city—butter, eggs, fruit, and brandy, ingredients for a rich fruit cake, were available. Prairie cooks had to hope their flour was not damp and that the cows were still giving milk.

Lorena Hays's Fourth of July menu contained thirteen different dishes, including "quite a number of kinds of cake";¹⁷ Phoebe Judson baked "cake of three varieties (fruit, pound and sponge)";¹⁸ James Bascom Royal dined on frost cake; William Swain had a choice of johnnycake or sweet cake; and the Conyers feasted on pound cake, fruit cake, jelly cake, Sweetwater cake, and "a dozen or more varieties, both of cake and pies not enumerated."¹⁹ Since no one bothered to include recipes we can only surmise how they were made.

Cakes are made with flour, sugar, a leavening agent,

eggs, butter or shortening, a liquid (usually milk), seasonings, and sometimes fruit. We know that flour, sugar, saleratus (leavening), and seasonings such as cinnamon and nutmeg were staples that the emigrants started out with and that the many cows provided milk, cream, and butter. But where did the emigrants find eggs? Standard pound and sponge cakes, which several emigrants listed as being on the menus, require many eggs. By the Fourth of July most emigrants had traveled past Fort Laramie, and a large portion would be camped around Independence Rock in central Wyoming. It is possible that in some years eggs were for sale at Fort Laramie or from peddlers; if so, cooks planned ahead and tucked them in with the oats or in the flour barrel and hoped that they would last. "Then, while at Omaha father packed a large box of eggs in oats," recalled Susan Walton.²⁰ Some emigrants started their journey with live chickens, which explains how the Royals made frost cake: "'Aunt Chloe' (Shanghai hen) laid an egg; used as frosting for the cake."²¹ Perhaps the cook followed the recipe from *Mrs. Hale's New Cook Book*:

ICING FOR CAKE

Beat the white of 1 egg perfectly light—then add 8 teaspoonsful of loaf sugar, pounded fine and sifted, very gradually, beating it well; after every spoonful, add one drop of the essence of lemon or rose-water to flavor it.²²

Though desirable, eggs are not necessary for all kinds of cakes, and in the nineteenth century it was not unusual to make cakes without eggs. Hens did not lay eggs during the short winter days; there was not enough light or warmth in the henhouse to raise their young. Only those cooks who took care to protect stored eggs had fresh ones in

the wintertime. Nineteenth-century cookbook authors routinely offered recipes for cakes without eggs.

An eggless cake recipe belonging to Alice Grierson, the wife of a frontier soldier, is probably typical of the cake the emigrants ate on the glorious Fourth. Grierson's collection of 600 recipes included several cakes without eggs; to distinguish the recipes she gave them numbers.

CAKE WITHOUT EGGS—NO. 1

2 cups and a half of flour, one cup of sugar, one cup sweet milk, one half cup of butter, one teaspoonful of cream of tartar, one half of soda. Flavor with lemon.²³

Other eggless cake recipes found in early cookbooks provide examples of the kinds of cakes the emigrants must have baked on that special day.

GINGER BREAD

1/2 cup of sugar, 1/2 cup of molasses, 1/4 cup of butter, 1/4 cup of lard, 2 cups of flour, 1 tablespoon of ginger, 1/2 teaspoon of soda [saleratus]; dissolve soda in 1/2 cup of boiling water; a pinch of salt.²⁴

FRUIT CAKE WITHOUT EGGS

1 pound fat pork chopped fine; pour over it 1 pint boiling water or coffee, 2 cups molasses, 1 cup sugar, 2 pounds raisins, 1 pound currants, 2 tablespoons cinnamon, 1 tablespoon nutmeg, 1 tablespoon allspice, 1 teaspoon soda, 8 cups flour.

The pound and sponge cakes that Phoebe Judson and E. W. Conyers baked would have presented the most trouble because these cakes traditionally call for at least ten to twelve eggs. The cakes may not have been true sponge

or pound cakes, but those travelers who wrote about them thought the cakes tasted as good as the real thing. Perhaps the emigrants thought a fancier name made the cakes sound better. Moreover, the comments about pound and sponge cakes come from journals written after the journey. In the same tradition as the caught fish that kept on getting bigger, the plain eggless cake kept growing lighter. Nevertheless, the emigrant cooks outdid themselves in baking cakes to serve at the Fourth of July dinners.

ICE CREAM AT THE SOUTH PASS

Ice cream desserts were also featured at several of the holiday celebrations. Taking advantage of the snow in the mountains, ingenious cooks sweetened milk, packed it into containers, and froze the concoction in makeshift ice cream machines. Thanks to Charles Parke, an explicit recipe survives:

After crossing Sweetwater for the last time, we traveled up the valley 10 miles and camped on a small brook, arriving at 1:00 P.M., where we laid over all afternoon. This being the nation's birthday and our under clothing not as clean as we could wish, we commenced our celebration by "washing dirty linen" or rather woolens, as we all wore woolen shirts. Washing done and shirts hung out to dry—we never iron—all hands set about enjoying themselves as best they could. Some visited two large banks of snow about half a mile from the ford on Sweetwater. Having plenty of milk from two cows we had with us, I determined to [do] something no other living man ever did.

in this place and on this sacred day of the year, and that was to make *Ice Cream at the South Pass of the Rockies*.

I procured a small tin bucket which held about 2 quarts. This I sweetened and flavored with *peppermint*—had nothing else. This bucket was placed inside a wooden bucket, or Yankee Pale, and the top put on. Nature had supplied a huge bank of coarse snow, or hail, nearby, which was just the thing for this *new factory*. With alternate layers of this, and salt between the two buckets and aid of a *clean* stick to stir with, I soon produced the most delicious ice cream tasted in this place. In fact, the whole company so decided, and as a compliment drew up in front of our Tent and fired a Salute, bursting one gun but injuring no one.²³

The Conyers party also feasted on ice cream. Sent out to hunt game for the Fourth of July dinner, the hunters found a huge snowball, which they carried back to camp by inserting a pole through the center. "The snowball was brought into use in making a fine lot of Sweetwater Mountain ice cream," noted E. W. Conyers.²⁴ Presumably the cooks used a variation of Parke's method since his recipe was similar to those found in period cookbooks. Besides providing instructions for making the ice cream, early culinary experts furnished recipes for various ice cream flavors such as vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, peach, saffras, gooseberry, and quince.

Ice cream was known in America in the early eighteenth century. George Washington was an ice cream lover, and Dolly Madison served ice cream to add distinction to her White House dinner parties. But it was not until 1846 that an American, Nancy Johnson, invented a

special machine for making ice cream. Her portable hand-cranked churn beat the mixture of cream and flavoring with a dasher (paddle) as the mixture froze. The invention revolutionized ice cream production because it resulted in a smoother-tasting ice cream, enabling anyone who had the machine to make the best quality of ice cream at home.

Like other emigrants, the Conyers spent a remarkable Fourth and ushered in the day with the firing of guns and the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The preparations began on July 3 when a "number of wagon beds are taken to pieces and formed into long tables." Everyone was involved. The men gathered wood and hunted for game, and the women made a flag and prepared a sumptuous repast. The momentous day featured a fantastic feast:

The day was ushered in with the booming of small arms, which was the best that we could do under the circumstances, so far away from civilization. Although the noise was not so great as that made by cannon, yet it answered the purpose. Just before the sun made its appearance above the eastern horizon, we raised our forty-foot flagstaff with "Old Glory" nailed fast to the top, which waved as majestically and graceful as though it had been made of the best Japan silk. After the flagstaff was raised to its position our company circled around the old flag and sang "The Star Spangled Banner." Then three rousing cheers and a tiger were given to "Old Glory." . . . All gathered around the tables loaded with refreshments, beautified and decorated with evergreens and wild flower of the valley, that speak volumes in behalf of the good taste displayed by the ladies, both in the decorative and culinary art. The following is our bill of fare in part:

MEATS

Roast Antelope, Roast Sagehen, Roast Rabbit, Antelope Stew, Sagehen Stew, Jack-Rabbit Stew, Antelope Potpie, Sagehen Fried, Jack Rabbit Fried.

VEGETABLES

Irish Potatoes (brought from Illinois), Boston Baked Beans, Rice, Pickles.

BREAD

White Bread, Graham Bread, Warm Rolls, fresh from the oven.

PASTRY

Pound Cake, Fruit Cake, Jelly Cake, Sweetwater Mountain Cake, Peach Pie, Apple Pie, Strawberry Pie, Custard Pie. (A dozen or more varieties, both of cake and pies not enumerated.)

DRINKS

Coffee, Tea, Chocolate, and Good, Cold Mountain Water, fresh from the brook. . . .

No person left the table hungry. After our feast patriotic songs were indulged in, winding up with three cheers for Uncle Sam and three for Old Glory. Of course, the ladies were not forgotten, and three rousing cheers were given for them. Take it altogether, we passed an enjoyable day—a Fourth of July on the plains never to be forgotten.²⁷

"OTHER LITTLE DISHES"

On the Fourth, emigrants made a special attempt to obtain fresh meat. Soups, stews, and fried or roasted vic-

tuals prepared from antelopes, sage hens, buffalo, fish, and wild fowl were featured attractions at holiday tables. The Buckinghamams "breakfasted at six upon Trout Strawberry & cream."²⁸ Francis Sawyer's family "went fishing this morning, then came back and cooked a good dinner." Chester Ingersoll killed a buffalo and served it for dinner, and Harry Rudd killed an antelope. Since his wife Lydia had recently made fresh gooseberry sauce, perhaps they used it as a sauce for the fresh-cooked game. An old recipe shows that gooseberry sauce was easy to prepare.

GOOSEBERRY SAUCE

Gather gooseberries when ripe, take off the stems and blossom ends, pour boiling water on them, and stew them in a covered pan till done and the liquor low: then add half a pound of sugar to each pound of berries, and a small lump of butter, rolled in flour; stew them a few minutes longer and serve them. They are a nice concomitant to roasted poultry and game.²⁹

The cook accompanying the Scottish lord Sir William Drummond Stewart outdid himself on the glorious Fourth. According to Matthew Field, a reporter traveling with Sir William, the cook prepared "Gumbo, boudon, tongue, forced meat balls."³⁰ Sir William, a rich Scotsman making his second trip to the West, was going only as far as the Rocky Mountains. Thirty-five other gentlemen made the trip, an adventurous hunting expedition in the mountains. Field, later writing about that day for his paper, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, elaborated on the Fourth of July meal (Field regularly sent back amusing reports of the "boys day out" in the wilderness):

Sketch

Two of the largest tents in camp were stretched in connection, giving a large space for the guests, who made themselves comfortable in cross-legged fashion, firmly deposited upon *terra firma*, along the sides of a long strip of oil-cloth laid out upon the grass. The viands displayed upon the oil-cloth were buffalo hump ribs, buffalo side ribs, buffalo tongues, buffalo marrow bones, buffalo "sweetbreads," and buffalo *et ceteras*. Most excellent plum pudding was manufactured by an amateur *cuisinier*, and juleps of legitimate mixture were among the luxuries of the feast.

Martha Read's group had just reached buffalo country when she recorded, "Had some buffalo meat for the first time. Found it very good eating. We feel thankful that we are spared to celebrate another American Independence Day here in these lonesome wilds where there is so much sickness and death."³¹ And Samuel Dundass, "despairing of a patriotic manifestation with our own train, resolved to join our Illinois friends in their celebration—sharing in the sequel of their performances an excellent dish of wild ducks."³² Exceptional and plentiful food was a rousing success as the emigrants saluted Old Glory.

Around several campfires the meat was baked in savory pies. "The crowning piece of the feast was a savory pie, made of sage hen and rabbit, with a rich gravy; the crust having been raised with yeast, was as light as a feather," recalled Phoebe Judson. Before being placed into the pie dough, the meat was fried, stewed, or roasted; the juices and fat rendered provided the gravy. Judson does not tell us the spices or vegetables she used, but one can imagine that she at least had some wild onions, salt, and pepper. Reminiscing about that Fourth of July fifty

years later, Judson wrote, "Not one of them is so vividly portrayed upon my mind as the one celebrated by the little band of adventurers, so far from civilization."³³

Any food that was not used every day became noteworthy on the Fourth, and canned foods came under that category. Along with freshly caught fish, the Sawyers had "canned vegetables, . . . rice cakes and other little dishes."³⁴ Randall Hewitt perked up the soup and stew pots with canned tomatoes. In 1862 that was such a rare treat that he expounded on the merits of having them on the Fourth of July:

A fitting close of our patriotic demonstrations of the day was in having an addition to our bill of fare at supper, which almost raised that uniform meal to the dignity of a banquet. Among our commissary stores were two or three cans of tomatoes which had kept remarkably well; they had been carefully preserved for some signal event, no doubt; and here was the event. To further signalize the "day we celebrate," two cans were opened, and their contents served in stew and soup. The company thought nothing ever tasted half so good. Taking surroundings into account with steady service of bacon and beans this simple vegetable came very near being the delightful change it was said to be, on that patriotic occasion. Perhaps it was the only time tomatoes were ever served as a course at a Fourth of July banquet.³⁵

Hewitt made a good assumption; tomato-based entrees were not popular Fourth of July dishes. But at least one other family, the Royals, served "preserved tomatoes" at their celebration dinner. The Hewitts and the Royals were following the established custom of serving only cooked

tomatoes; in that era, raw tomatoes were thought to be unhealthy. Eliza Leslie's popular book, *Directions for Cookery*, advised in 1848 that tomatoes "will not lose their raw taste in less than three hours cooking"; and in 1860, *Godey's Lady's Book*, the bible of the American housewife, repeated that advice.³⁶

Hewitt's canned tomatoes may have had a second distinction. Like corn, tomatoes are a new-world food, having originated in Peru. Joseph Campbell, of Campbell soup fame, had entered the canning business in the 1860s and by 1869, along with Abram Anderson, had established a canning firm that specialized in choice vegetables, including "beefsteak tomatoes."³⁷ Could Hewitt's tomatoes have been the forerunner of Campbell's tomato soup?

The award for the most elaborate dinner surely goes to the women in the Conyers group, but the two women who baked desserts for the Washington City and California Mining Company deserve the distinction of being the most overworked. They had mixed dough, rolled crusts, and stewed fruit to make pies and puddings for ninety-two men. The event was so impressive that it is mentioned in at least two diaries, Henry Austin's and Capt. J. Goldsborough Bruff's. Austin was a doctor with the company and Bruff its leader.

But in spite of wind or weather the cooks of the day commenced their culinary operations—The two ladies, Mrs. Thomas and Miss — prepared the desert which consisted of peach and apple pies and pudding, rice pudding, stewed apple and peaches.

The ladies honored us with their presence on the occasion; and to them we were indebted for several pounds of dried apples, and decent pastry.³⁸

Not everyone of course dined on decent pastry or ate savory pies. George Keller had to make do with "a Fourth of July dinner on musty hard bread, and beef bones in a state of *incipient putrefaction*" that he said was "highly relished by us, as any of the more *sumptuous* repasts served up to our friends in the states."³⁸ Amos Steck was less appreciative of his humble fare. He recorded in disgust that after having "no other refreshment than hard Bread for dinner, and poor bread at that, [he] will feel little patriotic ardor stimulating him even on this Great Day."⁴⁰ Steck had spent the day "driving a slow ox team in a sandy road, his eyes filled & his throat choked with it." Some diarists ignored the day and presumably dined on ordinary fare.

A LITTLE TOO MUCH FIREWATER

"Of course, it was a matter of mathematical certainty that some of us would get 'glorious' upon the 'Glorious Fourth,' and most gloriously were all such patriotic resolutions carried out," wrote Matthew Field to his paper, the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*.⁴¹ For large numbers of weary travelers, no Fourth of July was complete without copious toasts and the appropriate beverages.

Drinking was not confined to holidays, but on the Fourth one did not need the excuse of ill health to imbibe. Many emigrants took advantage of the national celebration and joined in the toasts and merrymaking. "This being the 4th of July the men must needs show their 'independence'; and such another drunken, crazy, hooting, quarreling fighting frolic I seldom witnessed," wrote Jason Lee, a missionary.⁴² Drinking was enjoyed by quite a few men in celebrations along the Platte River Road.

THE GLORIOUS FOURTH

Charles Stanton, in a letter to his brother, acknowledged that

yesterday, as I said before, we celebrated the 4th of July. The breaking one or two bottles of good liquor, which had been hid to prevent a few old tapsters from stealing, (so thirsty do they become on this route for liquor of any kind, that the stealing of it is thought no crime), . . . song and toast, created one of the most pleasurable excitements we have had on the road."⁴³

E. W. Conyers made no excuses for too much "firewater" when he described how the men had to prop up their chosen speaker. Either the alcohol had no effect on his oratorical skills or else everyone had had too much to care:

The question came up, To whom should the honor be given to deliver the oration? This honor fell to the lot of Virgil J. N. Ralston. . . . Unfortunately he with several other young men of our company, went this morning to the Devil's Gate, where they obtained a little too much "firewater," and by the time they reached the camp were considerably under its influence. But this was the glorious old Fourth, therefore the oration we must have. The Declaration of Independence was read by R. L. Doyle, of Keokuk, Ia., after which several of the boys gathered around Virgil, lifting him bodily upon the end of one of our long tables, where they steadied him until he became sufficiently braced up, and then let go of him. He spoke for over half an hour, and delivered, off-hand, an excellent oration.⁴⁴

Not everyone, of course, got drunk; and some emigrants just drank a toast. Virginia Reed, a thirteen-year-old girl

who was one of the survivors of the Donner party, wrote about the Fourth:

We celebrated the 4 of July on plat [Platte River] at Bever creek several of the Gentlemen in Springfield gave paw a botel of licker and said it shoulde be opend till the 4 day of July and paw was to look to the east and drink it and they was to look to the West and drink it at 12 o'clock paw treted the company and we all had some lemmnade, maw and paw is well.⁴⁵

As they settled into their new homes, the pioneers kept the spirit of the glorious Fourth. The holiday remained a celebration of patriotism and a connection to those families and friends back home. Thus, even for the emigrants and just as John Adams predicted, with noise and dressing up, the display of the flag, and brilliant and boring orations, the Fourth of July was and still is "celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary Festival."

EPILOGUE

The vigorous boiling of the cookery crock slowed to a simmer as the emigrants made the final push over the mountains to their new homes. After leaving Fort Hall, strategically located just before the California and Oregon routes diverged, emigrants had to make do with short supplies and shorter tempers. After four to six months of travel they were tired; every cookery hint learned and every scrap of food received took on added importance as cooks struggled to put food on the table. "Rations grew shorter and shorter. A real relish was prepared for one meal by boiling an antiquated ham bone and adding to the liquid, in which it was boiled, the few scrapings from the dough pan in which the biscuit from our last measure of flour— which, by the way, was both musty and sour—had been mixed," Catharine Amanda Scott Coburn recalled, describing her family's hardships as they crossed the Cascade Mountains on their way to Oregon.¹

Many travelers would not have made it to the fertile farmland of Oregon or the goldfields of California if the established residents of those states had not sent out relief parties to offer food to the exhausted travelers. Eighteen fifty-two was a particularly bad year for travel, as Martha Read noted in a letter written after she had settled in Oregon: