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Article Summary: From a dozen cowboys at the chuck wagon to a chic 1953 housewife making cookies in her Lincoln kitchen, photographs from the NSHS archives show that eating is the most universal of cultural activities.

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Names: Solomon D Butcher, Henry Oxnard, M C Ekstrom, Mack Downey, Ella Kinscella, Lydia Epperson

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Photographs / Images: Big Red Ranch, Sioux County, about 1900; Custer County Fair, Broken Bow, 1896; MC Ekstrom and his bailing crew about 1925; trucks and wagons at the Kimball elevator during wheat harvest about 1925; threshing crew and family members on the Baar farm near Kimball about 1925; cattle and a cowboy on an unidentified ranch south of Dix, Kimball County, about 1925; a field hand behind a pile of sugar beets near Scottsbluff in the North Platte River valley about 1920; cattle on the Mack Downey ranch on the South Loup River near Georgetown in Custer County, 1903; the Fairmont Creamery Company's Omaha delivery fleet, 1920; Beechners new supermarket, Lincoln, 1948; dinner, northwestern Nebraska, about 1907; picnic at Chautauqua Park, Beatrice, July 29, 1944; Ella Kinscella at her kitchen stove, Lincoln, about 1910; Lydia Epperson making cookies, Lincoln, 1953

Come an Get



It!



Eating is the most universal of cultural activities. We all do it. But what unites us also divides us. The what, when, and how of eating are markers of our heritage, and much of what we consider edible is determined by culture and geography.

In recent years an influx of immigrant and refugee populations has broadened and enriched the cultural menu for Nebraska, and, like the contributions of previous newcomers to the area, will shape our concept of food for generations to come.

Big Red Ranch, Sioux County, about 1900
NPSHS RG25/648

Custer County and the surrounding area are in the heart of Nebraska food production. Since the late 1870s the region has produced corn, cattle, and alfalfa in abundance. Custer County was also home to the legendary

photographer Solomon D. Butcher, whose photographs provide a visual chronicle of the birth and growth of American food production. In these two photographs Butcher showcases the best of the region's bounty.



Custer County Fair, Broken Bow, 1896. NSHS RG2608-2964



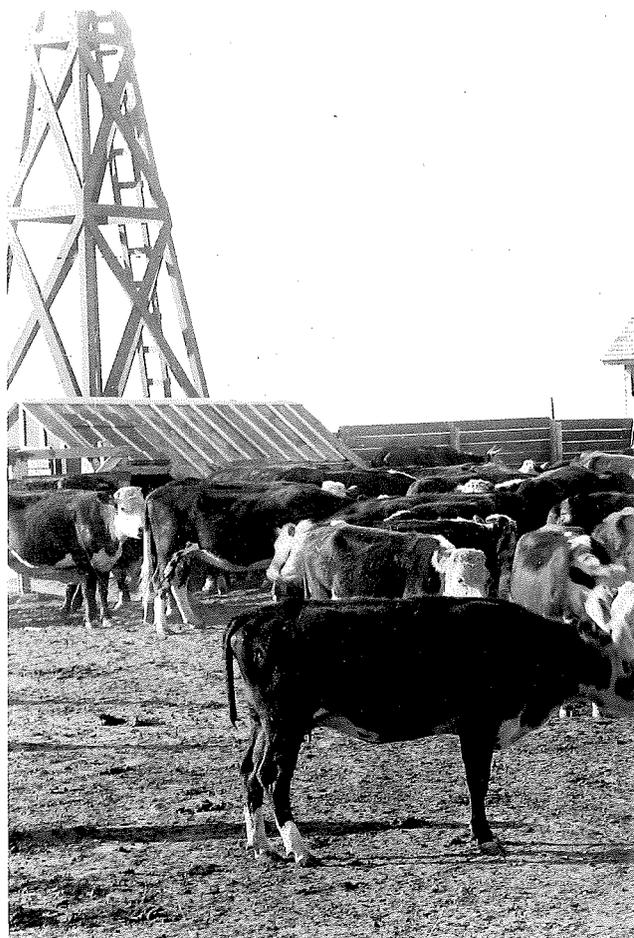
M. C. Ekstrom and his baling crew take a break for sandwiches, cookies, and coffee, about 1925. NSHS
RG2608-2046

Since the late 1870s the region has produced corn, cattle, and alfalfa in abundance.



Trucks and wagons at the Kimball elevator during wheat harvest, about 1925. RG5251-3a

When early Euro-Americans ventured into what would become Kimball County, they called it the Great American Desert. They could not have known it would become the Great American Breadbasket. From it came foodstuffs in abundance, including wheat, corn, oats, potatoes, and livestock. Not bad for a desert.





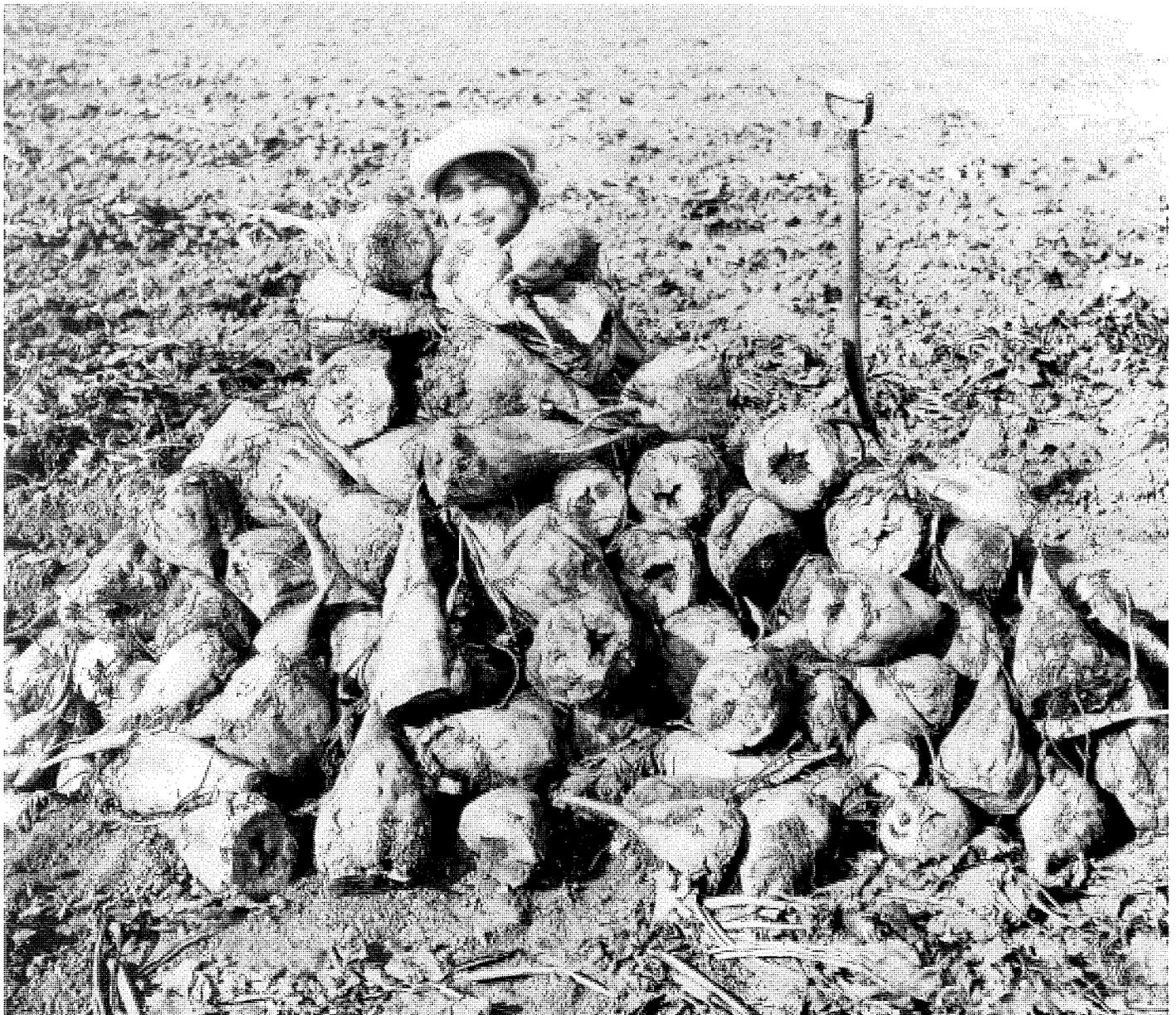
Threshing crew and family members on the Baar farm near Kimball, about 1925. RG5251-39



Cattle and a cowboy on an unidentified ranch south of Dix, Kimball County, about 1925. RG5251-32

When Napoleon Bonaparte isolated Great Britain from markets on the European continent in 1806, he also cut off his supply of sugar made from the cane grown in British colonies. To satisfy his sweet tooth he offered a prize for anyone who could find a substitute for cane from which to make granular sugar. Thus was born the sugar beet.

Beets came to Nebraska in 1889, brought by a Frenchman, Henry Oxnard, for whom Oxnard, California, is named. Sugar production is now a major industry in Nebraska's North Platte Valley.



A field hand behind a pile of sugar beets near Scottsbluff in the North Platte River valley, about 1920. NSHS RG3644.39



Cattle on the Mack Downey ranch on the South Loup River near Georgetown in Custer County, 1903. NSHS RG2608-1756

By the end of the Civil War, Texas was overloaded with cattle. Completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1866 furnished the link between the herds and the meatpacking city of Chicago. In 1868 the first of the great Texas herds were driven north to North Platte, and soon cattle by the thousands were being shipped east from Nebraska railheads.

Before long the nutritious grasslands of Nebraska were populated with cattle. In the twenty-first century, Nebraska, long known as the "The Beef State," is the nation's leader in both volume-per-acre and quality of beef.



The Fairmont Creamery Company's Omaha delivery fleet, 1920. NSHS RG4218-3-69

The DeLeval cream separator changed everything. Farmers no longer had to haul whole milk to a creamery, and then haul most of it back as skim milk to feed hogs. With a separator on the farm, all they took to the creamery was cream. And cream was big business.

Fairmont Creamery Company began in Fairmont in 1884 and rapidly expanded across southeastern Nebraska. The head-



Beechners new supermarket, Lincoln, 1948. NSHS RG2183-1948-0831-4

quarters moved to Omaha in 1907, and by 1930 the company had three thousand creameries across the United States. It soon was the nation's second largest food distributor, behind the national leader, Beatrice Foods, founded only seventy-five miles away. In 1947 the company changed its name to Fairmont Foods, and expanded its line to include snack and convenience foods.

The expansion of roads and the perfection of refrigeration meant that grocery stores could offer an increased variety of foods, including year-round fresh produce and prepared foods like TV dinners (claimed to be a Nebraska invention). Soon groceries became stores within stores, with bakeries, meat counters, specialty foods, and frozen foods. Small wonder all this under one roof became known as the "supermarket."



Dinner, northwestern Nebraska, about 1907. NSHS RG3474-5051

What's in a name? When it comes to meal-time, words mean a lot. City folks eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. On a farm or ranch, it's breakfast, dinner, and supper. Lunch is what you have mid-morning or mid-afternoon to tide you over. And to tell a real meal from a lunch, one Nebraska tradition uses the potato rule: if there are potatoes, it is a real meal and you have to say grace.

What makes a meal a feast? "Cooking for the crew" is a well-known phrase in farm and ranch country. Where there are jobs that require many hands, like haying or threshing,

substantial meals restore energy and build camaraderie—a feast indeed.

The picnic emerged in France in the late seventeenth century as a potluck dinner for wealthy people. As it moved to America, it became an outdoor feast where multiple families, friends or colleagues came together for food and fun.

In Nebraska, community parks became the common ground where hamburgers, hotdogs, potato salad, and relishes merge with games and laughter. Whatever the fare, it is the spirit that makes this meal a feast.

*Hamburgers, hotdogs, potato salad, and
relishes merge with games and laughter.*



Picnic at Chautauqua Park, Beatrice, July 29, 1944. NSHS M134-1944-07-29:5

It was a full time, daylong task.



Ella Kinscella at her kitchen stove, Lincoln, about 1910. NSHS RG2602-4



Lydia Epperson making cookies, Lincoln, 1953. NSHS RG2183-1953

The kitchen is the heart of the home, but it could also be a prison. Before electrification a meal required building a fire, waiting for the stove to come to heat, assembling the materials, stoking the stove, cooking, eating, stoking the stove to heat the water for cleaning up, waiting for the fire to die, and taking out the ashes. It was a full time, daylong task.

With the advent of modern utilities, that changed. The stove, gas or electric, was

instant on, instant off. Hot water was available at the turn of a faucet handle. And with refrigeration, the quantity and quality of Nebraskans' diets expanded.

Utilities came to urban areas of the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but rural electrification was not completed until the 1950s. Particularly for women, electrification meant less drudgery, less dawn-to-dark labor.

These photographs from the Nebraska State Historical Society's collection depict earlier generations of Nebraskans, their food, and aspects of their food preparation. They have been on display in various Nebraska towns accompanying Key Ingredients, a "Museum on Main Street" touring exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution. Text for this article is based on the exhibition label copy. Funding for the project was provided by the Nebraska Humanities Council.