

# NEBRASKA TRAILBLAZER

Nebraska  
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



---

## No. 12 What's For Lunch? Food Choices of the 1890s

---



### WHAT'S FOR LUNCH?

In the 1890s Nebraska was filled with many kinds of people. Indians, soldiers, cowboys, homesteaders, and foreign immigrants all called Nebraska home. Although many differences divided these groups, they had at least one thing in common. They all had to eat. Each group had to solve the problem of how to find and fix food. The bachelor homesteader in this 1886 photograph is trying to fix a meal. He has no table, so he's using his chairs for a table. If you had lived in Nebraska a hundred years ago, what would you have had for lunch? Turn the page . . .

**Today, most of us call our noontime meal "lunch."** For most people a hundred years ago, the noon meal was the biggest meal of the day. It was called "dinner."

**If you were an Omaha Indian** dinner might have been corn soup and "fry bread." In the 1890s, the Omaha tribe lived on a reservation along the Missouri River. Instead of hunting buffalo like they used to, the Omaha received rations of beef and flour from the government. Omaha women had always been good gardeners. They grew corn, beans, pumpkins, squash, and melons. They also knew how to gather and use prairie plants like sunflower seeds, chokecherries, wild grapes, and plums. Young milkweed pods were added to beef and corn to make corn soup. "Fry bread" was made from bread dough that was fried, rather than baked. It is a food that is still popular today. These Omaha Indians are drying beef the same way they used to dry buffalo meat. The buffalo was the most important source of food for all the Nebraska Indians before they were placed on reservations.

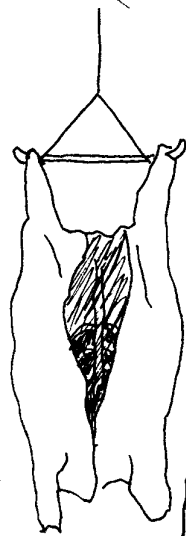


This Sioux man is cooking meat the old traditional way. He has made a container out of a cow's stomach. After adding meat and water, he places heated stones in the stomach. The heat from the stones heats the water and cooks the meat. This method was used for cooking buffalo or other meat.

# Where the homesteader's dinner came from . . .



It took lots of fuel to keep the cook stove going.

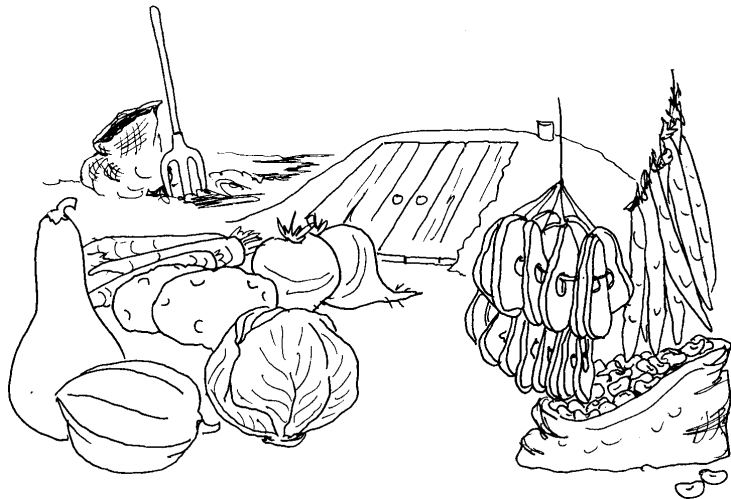


Meat came from the smokehouse.

Lard for shortening in baking came from cooked pork fat.



Soap for cleanup was also made from fat and butchering scraps.

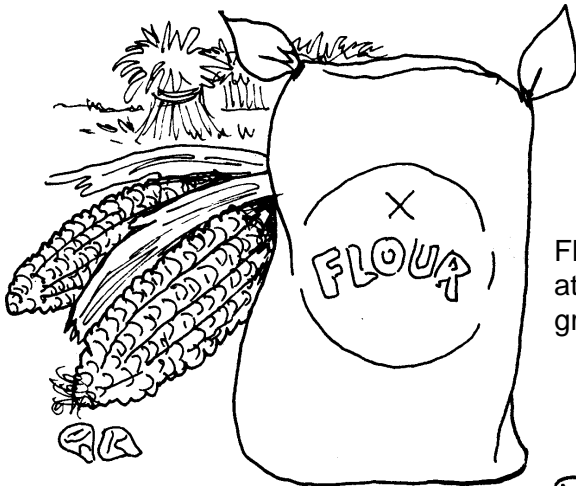


Vegetables came from the root cellar.

Dried fruits and vegetables



The family cow provided milk and cream. Butter was made in a churn and the leftover buttermilk was a treat.



Flour and cornmeal were ground at a local gristmill from grain grown on the homestead.

Some foods – called "staples" – could not be grown or made by the homesteader. These were bought at a store.



## Dinner on the homestead

No matter what the meal, corn was almost always on the homesteaders' tables. Corn would grow in Nebraska when other crops failed. The meal shown on a previous page was a very special one. Meat was not eaten often. The homesteader's family raised pigs for pork. They usually butchered only once a year, when it was cold. There were no refrigerators, so the meat had to be smoked or salted to keep it from rotting. The boys hunted wild game to give the family fresh meat. The family cow was for milk, not for meat.

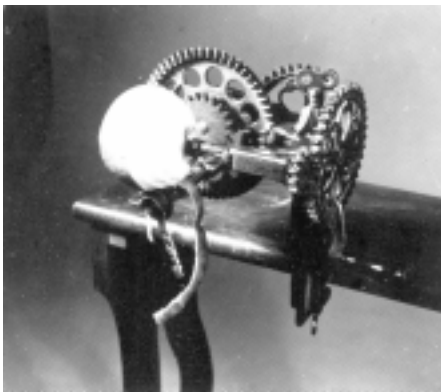


This cow was the family's source of milk, butter and cheese. It was important enough to include in this 1886 photograph, taken in Custer County.

Drying was the most common method of preserving food grown in the garden. Some food – like watermelon – couldn't be dried. So when the watermelons were ripe, the family ate watermelon for every meal, day after day.

Apples were peeled, sliced into rings, and dried. Dried apples were served so often they became the subject of a rhyme. "*Spit in my ears and tell me lies, but give me no more dried apple pies.*"

Homesteaders cooked on stoves. Since wood was scarce, cow chips, corn cobs, or twisted hay might have been used for fuel.



Apple peeler

## School lunch

The light meal homesteaders' children carried to school was called "lunch." Few of us today would want to trade lunches with these kids. They ate lots of sandwiches like we do. But what kinds of sandwiches? Cornbread and syrup. Bread and lard, maybe with a little sugar. Bread and bacon. It was a special treat to have a sandwich with meat in it. There were no peanut butter and jelly sandwiches – peanut butter wasn't made in the 1890s.

Water was the usual drink with lunch. Schools had no refrigerators, so there was no cold milk. Students drank from a dipper out of a bucket of water. The bucket had to be carried from the closest well. If the school had a pump outside, children took turns pumping water.



There were no plastic lunch boxes or thermoses on the homestead. This girl is carrying her lunch in a tin container called a lunch pail. Some families could afford to buy lunch pails for their children. Others saved empty lard or syrup buckets for use as lunch pails.



## Dinner on the range

If you were a cowboy rounding up cattle in the 1890s, you might have sat down with a plate of beef, beans and biscuits fresh from the camp's dutch oven. The cowboys' cook worked out of a kitchen on wheels – the chuck wagon. The camp cook had a very important job



Dutch oven

## "Punchin' the dough"

(song below)

"Come all you young waddies, I'll sing you a song.  
Stand back from the wagon, stay where you belong,  
I hear you observin' I'm fussy and slow  
But while you're punchin' cattle I'm punchin' the dough."

"Come all you young waddies, I'll sing you a song. Stand back from the wagon, stay where you belong, I

hear you observin' I'm fussy and slow but while you're punchin' cattle I'm punchin' the dough."



These people are enjoying a picnic lunch along the South Loup River. The year is around 1890.



### **Dinner at the fort**

If you were a soldier of Troop C at Fort Robinson, you might have eaten in the "mess hall." This photograph from 1899 shows the mess hall tables set for a dinner of roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, bread, tapioca pudding, coffee, and beer. Meat and potatoes were served at breakfast, too. Supper was sometimes "leftovers." Bread and gravy or pancakes and syrup were often on the supper menu.

## Dinner from other countries

Many people came to Nebraska from other countries. The foods from their homeland were often not available here. Immigrant cooks tried to "make do" with ingredients they could get here. They learned to cook "American"-style food. "Americans" learned to enjoy "foreign" food like spaghetti and runzas.

Food from the home country is still important today, and is cooked for special occasions. Swedish families may eat *lutefisk* (pronounced LOOT-fisk), a kind of dried fish, at Christmas. Germans from Russia cook and eat "*schnitzsuppe*" (pronounced SHNIT-zoop), a soup made from dried fruit, on Good Friday.

What kinds of foods does your family make for special days?



Central European immigrants at Alliance, Nebraska, about 1900.

If you would like a copy of homesteader recipes, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: Education Department, Nebraska State Historical Society, P.O. Box 82554, Lincoln, NE 68501.

**NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
**1500 R Street, Box 82554, Lincoln, NE 68501**  
[www.nebraskahistory.org](http://www.nebraskahistory.org)

Published by the Nebraska State Historical Society for  
Free Distribution to Nebraska Fourth Grade Children

Ongoing support for *Nebraska Trailblazer* is provided by  
The Dorothy Weyer Creigh Memorial Endowment,  
established with the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation  
through gifts from Thomas Creigh, Jr., in memory of his wife.



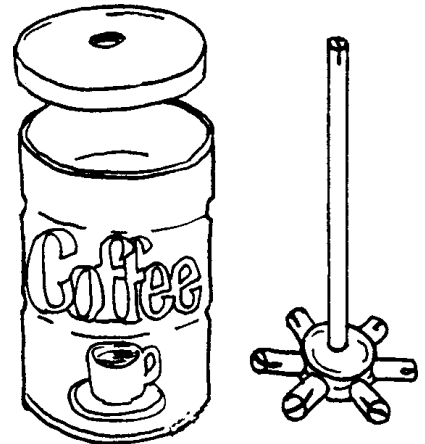
# MAKING BUTTER

Helping make butter was a common chore for children on the homestead or farm. You can make butter, too. Follow the directions below to make your own butter churn or use a glass jar.

## Making a Butter Churn

You'll need: a coffee can, glass jar, or any tall, wide-mouthed container with a snap-fit plastic lid, and Tinkertoy parts.

1. Make a "dasher" for your churn by putting eight short (1") Tinkertoy dowels around the edge of a Tinkertoy wheel. Use one long Tinkertoy dowel for the handle (see drawing).
2. Cut or punch a hole in the center of the snap-on lid just big enough for the dowel handle to fit through easily. Put the dasher in the container. Slide the lid over the dowel and snap it on the container. Now you're ready to churn!



## Making Butter

You'll need: whipping or heavy cream, salt, a bowl and a spoon, your butter churn OR a clean glass jar with a tight-fitting lid, in which you've placed a clean peg clothes pin.

1. Let the cream stand at room temperature for a few hours. Then pour it in the churn OR jar with the clothes pin in it until it is about half-full.
2. Place the lid on tightly. Begin beating the dasher up and down with a steady rhythm OR put the lid on the jar and begin shaking it.
3. Take turns! It takes 20 or 30 minutes before the butter lumps float to the top and stick to the dasher OR clothes pin.
4. When no more curds seem to form, remove the lid and scoop out the curds. The butter will be very soft. Put the curds in the bowl and rinse them under cold water to remove any milk left in the butter. Milk left in the churn or jar is buttermilk. You can cool it and drink it, if you like.
5. The butter will probably taste sweeter than the butter you usually eat. Stir in just a pinch or two of salt to get that familiar butter taste. Butter can be eaten right away or you can put it in the refrigerator to cool. When it is cool, you can shape it into balls, sticks, or pats. Enjoy!



peg clothes pin