

Eighty-four year old M.T. Fuller recalls living near his father's Georgia grist mill until the Great Depression forced his family to move to a farm in Carroll County. In great detail Fuller can describe his sister's undergoing the proper kitchen training and the specific steps they took each morning to get the family's meals underway. Biscuits, cornbread, cakes, and variations of sweet potato pie were all staples in the Fuller household diet during the 1930s. The family farm often produced the ingredients needed to cook and bake, however when times were hard and money scarce, many families including the Fuller's found ways to improvise. Seasonal availability and special events often dictated the Fuller menu, but M.T. remembers the female members of his family baking and mixing meals with ease, without the aide of a measuring cup or spoon. According to M.T. Fuller, the "old-fashioned" methods of cooking have gradually given way to more modern traditions, and although it might be easier to make frozen biscuits or purchase a cake at the bakery, the homemade version has and will always yield a "better flavor."

Interview of M. T. Fuller
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DA: All right. Umm, in your family, growing up, uh...who did the baking in your family?

MTF: Well, my mother did most of the baking. But now the girls learned to bake at a pretty early age. My oldest sister, who is a couple of years younger than I am, she began to learn to cook, uh, biscuits and cornbread along at about ten, eleven years of age. That was customary back in those days, for the girls to help out. They'd watch the mother and they learned how to bake biscuits and make cornbread. And then a little bit later on they got into baking cakes. By the time they were fourteen or fifteen years old they could bake a cake or [stutters] make a pie. So they had to learn at a pretty early age.

DA: Did you ever do any...ever help out with the baking?

MTF: No, no. I wasn't into that. I've done most of my baking and cooking stuff in recent years, uh, but I did observe it, though. Yeah.

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DA: All right. Uh, you said that they, uh, they baked cornbread and biscuits and some cakes. So what else did they bake?

MTF: Well, we had two kinds of potato [pie], from sweet potatoes. You had a potato custard. And then you had a potato pie; it was a deep-panned pie. Uh, that's

where they cut the potatoes up and, uh, put in a pan, oh, probably three inches deep. And then they, uh, had a concoction with those potatoes with butter and sugar and maybe vanilla flavoring and so on. And then they rolled out a crust to put on top of that, and it was cooked in an old wood stove. And, uh, that was a good pie. Now the custard was, uh, much thinner, um, and we enjoyed both. We enjoyed potato custard and potato pies. But now, you know, we hilled our potatoes. We'd plow 'em up in the fall and then we put them in a hill. The way we did that hill, we'd, uh, put a little mound of dirt maybe about, uh, I'd say, uh, five feet across in a circle and have it up, up about ten inches above the surface of the ground. Put pine straw on it, put your potatoes on that, and you, you'd heaped your potatoes, and then you put pine straw over those, then got cornstalks and pulled 'em together and it looked like a teepee, an Indian teepee. Uh, and then you covered those stalks with dirt [pause] and let those potatoes cure for, oh, probably three or four weeks they cured in there, and then you worked you out a hole through that dirt and the cornstalks and the straw where you could reach in to get the potatoes out. And those would last until in the spring. So that's how we kept the sweet potatoes.

DA: And so, what, what did the curing do for 'em? Did it...

MTF: Uh, it made 'em sweeter.

DA: Did it?

MTF: Yeah. You see they had a lot of sap in those potatoes, and that sap kind of dried out and the potatoes became sweeter. Now you had potato-curing houses. If you go over here and go down the Roopville Highway, the old Johnson Potato Curing House is still sittin' there. And the government helped finance the building of those. They'd put those potatoes in there in boxes and then they, uh, they heated that house. They had sort of a furnace that would get that, that inside of that building to a certain temperature and dried those potatoes out. And that did it much faster. So you paid Mr. Johnson so much a bushel to cure your potatoes. Have you seen that house?

DA: No, sir, I haven't

MTF: Well, you need to drive down there. There, there's pictures of it all around over the county. Its got, the Coca-Cola Company kept it painted. So if you'll drive down the Roopville Highway, it's down there on the right about, uh, probably about seven miles down from town.

DA: Okay. Um, when your sisters and your mom would bake, what time of day did they, did they normally do the baking?

MTF: Oh, well, you had to hit the floor early in the mornings. Uh, they had to fire up the stove, you know. It took a little while to get that old wood stove; uh, you're thinking of, uh, thirty minutes to get it good and hot. And then the mother would get up and, uh; you had the bread tray. It was a wooden bread tray. Now, sometimes those things were hand carved. But the one we had was, uh, we bought it. But I have seen some hand-carved, uh, bread trays. And they put the flour in there and then, in those days you didn't buy much self-rising flour. Most of it was plain flour and they added the ingredients, the salt and the sodi, and the baking powders and, uh, usually buttermilk, and mix that all together. Sometimes they'd put an egg in it, too, and stirred that together and rolled it out. And then they, they patted those biscuits out by hand. Now, sometimes folks would use a cutter, but not much back in those days. They didn't use; you didn't see many folks use a cutter. They rolled 'em out by hand and put 'em in a baking pan and slid 'em into the oven. And they had to cook, uh; it probably took, uh, oh, for thirty, forty minutes to bake those biscuits. And then you had a warmer if it was a, if it was one of those big fancy stoves; up above the top of the stove you had a warmer, and you could stick those biscuits in there to keep 'em warm. Even by lunchtime they'd still be warm.

DA: Uh, you said you didn't use the self-rising flour. What types of flour and meal did you use?

MTF: Well, it was, it was plain flour, now, uh, sometimes we raised our own wheat and we'd take it to the mill to get it ground. Now that wheat you could get, uh, the whole grain wheat. We'd just tell the miller to not run it through the bolter, the bolting cloth. That's what sifted it. Uh, he just left the grain go through the rocks and come right on out into the, to the trough that caught that bread, uh, that flour. And it was whole grain; that's the way you ate it. It had the husk and everything on it, and we called that, uh, gram bread. You can still buy gram bread yet, but it was pretty, it was kind of rough. But we liked it, we liked it. We'd eat that some, but now when that flour was ground, you got, uh, you had about three or four grades there. If, if, you usually have the miller to grind you out maybe a peck of whole, of the, uh, gram bread we called it. And then you had what they, uh, called the bran and the seconds and the shorts and then the regular flour. That's when it went though the boltin' cloth; that was your whitest flour. And that was just plain flour. Now later on, the government required the gristmills to add uh, uhhh, vitamins to that flour. I know I had, I had some friends that operated a mill, and they wanted 'em to add ingredients to that flour. But we never did that when my dad was running the mill. Uh, so that's, that's, that's what you got out of that wheat when you ground it. And you had different bags to put that stuff in. Now the shorts, the shorts and the seconds and the bran, you fed that to the pigs. And the flour, and then the flour when it had gone on through the boltin' cloth, uh; all of those things had been sifted out of it. Now the boltin' cloth; you've probably never seen a boltin', probably never heard of a boltin' cloth. That boltin' cloth was probably about, uh, I'd say twelve feet long and it was, uh, built with a shaft through the middle of it. And this cloth was silk. And it was built about in sort of

a hexagon shape. And that, uh, ground wheat would go into the boltin' cloth and it would turn and that flour would go through there and it would catch it in something like a trough under that. And that went on down through an auger, carried it down to a box, down back by the rock, and that's where they sacked it up.

DA: Can you go from start to finish in, in detail form in the step in which you processed the flour in the gristmill?

MTF: Well now you see I, I was only just a little fella when my daddy quit grindin' wheat, but I, I've been to it in the other mills. The old Lowell Water Mill down here, which is about 6 miles uh south of here, we used to take our wheat over there, an' uh let me see, that first uh, that, that wheat was dumped into what we called a hopper an' it when down under the mill an' it had a blower that would blow any of the trash that might be in that wheat, it would blow it out an' then it had a, a conveyor belt an' it had cups on it an' it would pick that wheat up in those little cups an' take it up an' uh let it go into another shoot an' that would go into a rock, the grinders, the grindin' rocks, an' it would grind it an' then from there it uh it went back into another conveyor belt an' it carried it up to the boltin' cloth an' that boltin' cloth kinda separated it into these different, like we got the seconds, an' shorts an' all that stuff. It came out uh through that cloth an' uh what was uh left in the cloth was like the seconds an' the shorts an' the good flour had gone through the cloth an' was caught in uh, in uh a trough right below the boltin' cloth an' they had a conveyor there that carried it down to a shoot an' it was uh you could hook your sacks onto that shoot, a wooden shoot, everything, all those shoots were made out of wood, an' then they just hook the sack onto the end of that shoot an' it would go into the sacks. An' you had a shoot for the seconds an' a shoot for the shorts an' a shoot for the flour. See that's how, that's how it was done.

DA: Now when you talkin' about the, the uh let me see, grem bread . . .

MTF: Gram bread.

DA: Gram bread. Now did it not, you didn't separate all . . .

MTF: No, no, when you got gram bread it just went right through the rock an' right out into the trough where the miller would uh sack it up for you. Right.

DA: Uhm, when you didn't grow your own flour uh or meal, how did you go about getting it?

MTF: Well you bought it at the store. Now uh durin' the Depression days we had peddlin' trucks that went by an' you have a neighbor over there close to you, the Mr. Jones, he used to drive a peddlin' truck, he used to go right by here with it, but he had this business at Roosterville down in Heard County that was where his

home was an' his store an' that where he'd load his truck up an' hit the road. An' he'd have groceries, he'd have flour an' several different types of groceries, canned goods, cheese an' that sorta thing an' then he would buy uh from the ladies on the route. He would buy butter an' eggs an' chickens an' they would even, he would even buy corn uh that was sorta a swap out you might say. The ladies, now my mother, I've seen her go out to the peddlin' truck with a bucket of eggs an' she'd trade him the eggs for uh groceries on the, may-, maybe she would buy uh some canned salmon, see that was a big deal back in those days, canned salmon. Uh or uhh if it was in the wintertime maybe canned tomatoes or canned peaches or somethin' like that, you know, but you could also buy a sack of flour if you wanted to an' he carried meal. If uh some of the farmers didn't have any meal he'd carry the meal. He'd sell that too

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MTF: [speaking over DA's last words] All your fat came from lard in those days. You raised your hogs an' you uh you rendered the lard outta the meat. Uh occasionally if you ran outta lard, which you would do a lotta times by the spring of the year you could buy shortening of course that was vegetable shortening, buy it in uh usually 'bout five pound cans but uh we would have sometimes you'd buy a big can of lard an' that would be say twenty five pounds or something like that. You didn't use a whole lotta shortening in those days, most of it was lard. And even today, biscuits cooked uh with lard taste better than those with shortening, but we are thinkin' about the fat content now, you know.

DA: Uh when your family baked the bread, what kind of uh things did they use for sweeteners?

MTF: Well 'course sugar was very cheap, we used sugar, but uh believe it or not sometimes we used syrup as sweetener, now they make syrup cakes they called it, they make up, they make up the dough an' uh add syrup to it as a sweetener maybe put a little bit of vanilla flavorin' in it an' that, that was a sweetener. Uh you had to learn to try different things back in those days because sometimes person run outta sugar maybe they didn't even have money to buy sugar, but maybe they had a little syrup over there somewhere an' they would use that as a sweetener.

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DA: How, how did you go about measurin' the ingredients for the bakin'?

MTF: Well, those ladies didn't do much measurin'. They knew about how much a pinch of this an' a pinch of that. That's pretty much how they did it. Uh some of 'em might use a spoon, they might say we'd use a teaspoon full of this an' a tablespoon full of that, but you didn't see those ladies using measurin' containers like we have now, they used it with their fingers. They knew about how much a teaspoon full was or a tablespoon full or a half a cup. They pretty well knew. They, they didn't have to do much measurin' like, like bakin' powders an' soda an' that sorta thing, they, they just pretty well guessed at it.

DA: Pretty amazing. When, when they cooked you mentioned the wooden, the wooden pans that they used, what other types of pans or dishes did they use when they were baking?

MTF: Well know you had those ol' black iron skillets like we still have today uh they used that for frying. Now you had a different kind of pan, I, when I bake cornbread now, I use an iron skillet but they had uh a metal pan with high side to it about, ohh that side would be about two inches high, an' they would put their, their mixture into that pan an' cook it in the stove uh it's an odd thing that back in those days they didn't cook cornbread much in a, in a skillet, they used that skillet for fryin' purposes like fryin' sausage or side meat or bacon, fried chicken an' that sorta thing, you know, yeah.

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DA: Why did you cook certain things, were there special events that you cooked certain foods . . .

MTF: Well now on the weekend - chicken, that was the big event. Uh all durin' the week uh pretty much you ate for lunch, well let, let's just give you a typical day of what my mother would do. She would get up in the mornings an' cook breakfast, but didn't let the fire go out in the stove now. Kept the fire goin' an' a lotta times we, the rest of us would go on to the field to work an' she stayed there in the house an' uh you didn't eat biscuits for lunch an' supper durin' the week that, a biscuit was a specialty just for breakfast. Now on the weekends you might have some biscuits on Sunday for Sunday lunch, but uh not durin' the week, but then she would cook while she had the stove heated up she would prepare the lunch an' she would prepare enough to do for lunch an' for supper, we called it supper. An' I suppose that it was in the spring when you had turnip greens, all right, she'd cook the cornbread, she would cook the turnip greens an' she would season that with a piece of fatback or side meat from pigs an' then she might cook some dried beans to go along with that an' if we still had some meat, now you know your meat, you would kill your hogs along, usually about December an' that meat would last you until say April or May, an' then you were outta meat, you'd run out, you had to buy it from then on uh she might fry a little bit of side meat to go along with the vegetables an' uh that was your meal. What you had for lunch, you had the same thing for supper, that was, that was the leftover from lunch you had it for supper. An' it was cornbread, that's right

DA: Cornbread was strickly uh an afternoon or dinner . . .

MTF: Uh for lunch, it was for lunch an' for what we call dinner now right. Now, oh then of course she would cook a little dessert of some kind usually, it might be potato pie or she might cook teacakes or some kind of cookies, but that uh, that's the way desserts went in those days.

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DA: In your family uh why do you think that th-, the bakin' traditions have changed?

MTF: Well folks just don't wantta be bothered with takin' up that much time when you can go to the bakery an' buy it uh they say, they say well uh well one thing a lotta the younger women are not, they're not skilled in bakin'. You know they used to teach home ec [economics] in schools. Well they 'bout quit teachin' home ec in schools now an' the girls don't learn that an' uh the modern mothers a lotta of 'em are workin' an' they don't have time to teach the girls, so it's, it's best to go to the bakery an' just buy it at the bakery. Gotta way from it uhm I pray bakin' goin' to play out one of these days if it keeps goin' like it is.

DA: Do you uhm, when you compare the uh the baked goods that your mother made an' your sisters made back when you were grownin' up an' the frozen biscuits an' box cakes an' the box cookies an' everythin' that you can get today [inaudible] everythin' that you can buy at the bakery. Do they taste the same or . . . ?

MTF: [speaking over DA's last words] Naw, naw, no the homemakin' to me is still the best uh see they put ingredients in those cakes in things at the bakery that uhm that some how it changes the taste it just, it just doesn't taste as good like, like for instance a german chocolate cake uh a home baked uh german chocolate just just can't beat at all or a home baked coconut cake, bakers just can't cook them as good as these ladies out here that been doin' it a long time. It's got a better flavor, better flavor.

DA: I guess uh changin' in traditions kinda definite of . .

MTF: I, I would think think so right, yeah.