

A Great Cook

In Brevard, A Special Way With Old Southern Dishes

(Reprinted from The Charlotte Observer)

BY HELEN MOORE
Observer Food Editor
BREVARD — Good cooks often develop their skills through much practice, the kind of practice Mrs. Selena Robinson, outreach worker for Western Carolina Community Action Inc., has experienced feeding her family and those for whom she has worked.

Friends who have sampled her cooking acknowledge that she has a special way with old Southern favorites. Her macaroni and cheese, moist and tender, is a constant request at parties and covered dish suppers. Her fried chicken, juicy and crisp, is a delight, along with her delicious cakes and pies.

"She makes the best fruit pies I've ever tasted," says her co-worker, assistant superintendent for Western Carolina Community Action, Fred Gordon. "I'd say she's one of the best cooks around."

"Her cooking is great," agrees Mrs. Clyde Osborne, women's editor of the Brevard Transylvania Times, who employed Mrs. Robinson as a domestic years ago.

"I would leave a note saying 'cook these things' and she would cook them different ways. If I left green beans, they weren't always cooked the same way, but they were always delicious."

Picking up a strip of dumpling dough, Mrs. Robinson breaks off pieces and drops them into boiling chicken broth. It seems odd to her to be making a small pot of chicken and dumplings, but there's only one 19-year-old son at home now. The rest of the family has grown and gone.

A few years ago, the pot was larger and the strips of dumplings endless as she struggled to feed 14 children (three sets of twins included), her husband and aged father.

"I really look back on my life and I wonder how we did make it," ponders Mrs. Robinson, who is 54. She knows for sure the years were hard and much as they needed community help, they were refused it time and again.

"We never were able to get surplus food. There was a big run around in that welfare department. There was a lot of people didn't get it," she recalls.

Living in a four-room shack without adequate heat, hot water or bath facilities, the Robinsons struggled to feed and clothe their large brood and watch them graduate from high school.

Mrs. Robinson's husband, Chester, who had a fifth grade education, worked for 30 years at a filling station, where his top weekly pay was \$50. The last few years of his life, before his death of lung cancer 4½ years ago, he worked at a better paying job as a janitor at the nearby NASA tracking station.

During most of this time, Mrs. Robinson worked as a domestic during the day and made slipcovers and curtains at night for customers. And when she finished sewing for others, she made clothes for her children and herself — sometimes working all night.

"She had a talent for recycling just about everything anybody ever gave her and took it apart and completely remade it for her children.

"I had a canned ham one



Mrs. Robinson Bags Potatoes Carolina Community Action Work. For Distribution in her Western

time and she asked me if she could have the can. I said, 'Of course.' She said, 'I think I can make something out of it.' I don't know what she used it for, but she did."

Mrs. Robinson remembers some of her late night sessions as extensions of her children's school activities.

"My oldest daughter would volunteer me for everything. I've always made all of the children's clothes and all of mine. Every time they came up with something to do (at school) they said, 'My mama'll do it.' So I made outfits for cheerleaders, for marjoettes, proms and everything. We never had money to do anything with, so all we could give was our service."

The family had a backyard garden each year and Mrs. Robinson canned much of their food. They once had a few hogs, but later, town laws prevented them from raising livestock.

"It would take five pounds of potatoes for a meal or four pounds of vegetables like beans. I could make out with a pound of rice, along with everything else.

"The biggest meats we could have were hamburger, chicken and fish. We would have meat approximately twice a week. If I had macaroni, a pot of cabbage, some dried beans and corn bread, that was it.

"Sometimes I'd use scalloped potatoes done with cheese — we'd use that as a meat substitute — and that day I'd have a cobbler pie — peach, apple or blackberry from the fruit I canned. A lot of nights I'd make a batch of deviled eggs or salmon croquettes.

"Of course, hamburger you could use so many different ways. I'd make shepherd's pie, hamburger casserole or meatballs and put enough stuff in it that you'd know it was meat and you wouldn't know it either."

"Sometimes I'd buy chicken necks and backs and cook a pot of noodles. The children loved to suck the bones.

"At any time you could buy a soup bone at a reasonable price and I would make a big pot of vegetable soup and make gingerbread and peanut butter sandwiches.

If there were any pinto beans left from a meal, they didn't go to waste. Mrs. Robinson made a spice cake with the leftovers.

The family couldn't afford soda pop or dairy milk. Mrs. Robinson made lemonade or tea from sassafras roots they dug in the mountains. The family used canned milk, mixed half and half with water, for cereal, or dried milk when they could get it.

The lack of adequate milk worried Mrs. Robinson. "It's a wonder they didn't all have bad teeth," she says.

Somewhere in Mrs. Robinson's early married life, she had read in magazines or books about the basic food groups and tried to make her meals as nutritious and balanced as she could.

"We didn't have any home ec to speak of," she recalls about her high school years.

"I always just read whatever I could pick up. Most of the time when I worked in white people's homes I would see they had books and I'd read, if I had to take one to the bathroom."

When the Robinson children brought friends home after church on Sundays, store-bought ice cream cones were not part of the picture. The children were treated instead to whatever was at hand and could be made — boiled custard, frozen in an old ice cream freezer, apple float or peaches and cupcakes.

The beginning of the 60's, the Robinsons had 10 children in school. Mrs. Robinson's day began around 4 a.m. when she

arose to prepare breakfast for the oldest ones, who had to ride an early school bus across the county line to Hendersonville after Brevard's black high school burned.

Free lunches were not available. A few of the children worked in the school cafeteria for their meals.

"I wouldn't have any money for lunch and I wouldn't know what to do. So I started making cupcakes and they took them in a tin and sold them on the bus and they took the money to pay for their hot lunch.

"Well, times would get to where I wouldn't have the stuff for cupcakes, so I'd make old-fashioned fried pies. Then the teachers got to where they'd begin to send me orders."

Even with the hardships and deprivations, Mrs. Robinson remembers the years as happy ones.

"My brother said we were the happiest poor family he had ever seen," she says with a laugh.

Today she cooks for two — a difficult adjustment after preparing so much food for so long. Just in case there are leftovers around, though, a stream of 32 grandchildren can take care of them.

Here are some of Mrs. Robinson's recipes:

CHICKEN AND STRIP DUMPLINGS

1 (2½ to 3-pound) chicken
Water
Salt
1 stick margarine
3 cups plain flour
3 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup shortening
Milk

Cut up chicken, wash and put into a large pot. Cover with cold water, add salt to your taste and simmer meat until it is tender. When done, add margarine to broth.

To make dumplings, mix

together flour, baking powder and salt. Cut in shortening until mixture and the particles are small. Add enough cold milk to make a workable dough. Knead the dough until firm.

Roll out dough on a floured board. Cut into 1-inch strips. Mrs. Robinson breaks up her strips into pieces about 1 to 2 inches long as she adds them to the boiling chicken broth. You may leave the strips longer if you wish. Cover and let dumplings simmer about 15 minutes.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.

NO SAUCE MACARONI AND CHEESE

1 (8-ounce) box macaroni
2 teaspoons salt
2 cups milk
3 eggs
8 ounces grated sharp cheese
1 stick butter, cut into pieces
Paprika

Put water into pot and bring to boil. Add macaroni and cook until tender. Drain but do not rinse.

Place macaroni into greased 2-quart casserole.

Mix salt, milk and eggs with beater. Set aside.

Sprinkle most of grated cheese into macaroni and add pieces of butter. Mix with fork. Pour milk and egg mixture over macaroni.

Sprinkle rest of grated cheese over top. Sprinkle lightly with paprika.

Bake in 350-degree oven until firm and brown on top.

CREASY GREENS

2 pounds wild creasy greens, cleaned and washed
1 (4- or 5-inch) slice of salt pork or
4 or 5 pork tails
1 teaspoon salt, or to taste
¼ pod of red pepper
1 large onion.

Put greens in a large pot, cover with water and parboil for about 30 minutes.

While greens are cooking, put salt pork or pig tails in another pot and cover with water. Cook meat until greens have finished parboiling.

Lift out greens with a long fork and put into pot with salt pork and water. Add salt, red pepper and cook slowly, stirring constantly, until almost done.

Peel the onion and lay on top of greens and let cook until tender.

Serve greens with cornbread.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.

BLACKBERRY COBBLER

2 cups plain flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
½ cup shortening
Water
1 quart blackberries, fresh or canned
2 cups sugar
1 teaspoon nutmeg
Butter

Sift flour, baking powder, salt, sugar and shortening. Mix until mixture is like meal. Add water, a tablespoon at a time, until the dough will hold together.

If you use canned berries, use the juice along with the berries. If you use fresh, add about 2 cups of water to the fruit.

Place a layer of berries in a greased deep-dish pie pan.

Add 1 cup sugar, ½ teaspoon nutmeg and a few pieces of butter over the fruit.

Roll out the dough and cover the layer of blackberries.

Add the remaining blackberries over the dough, along with the remaining sugar and nutmeg and a few more pieces of butter. Roll another layer of dough to cover cobbler. Cut slits in top crust.

Place in a 350-degree oven and bake until brown and thoroughly done. Serve with the following hard sauce.

HARD SAUCE:

1 stick butter or margarine
1 cup granulated sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla.

Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Add vanilla. Chill. Serve in dabs over pie while hot.

COUNTRY FRIED CHICKEN

1 fryer cut up
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper
1 teaspoon paprika
1 cup flour

Wash fryer and put into salt water (1 teaspoon salt with enough water to cover chicken) for about 30 minutes. Drain.

Mix salt, pepper and paprika with flour. Roll chicken in mixture.

Heat shortening (use enough to fill the frying pan half full). Put chicken parts into the hot fat. Cover chicken and fry until chicken is light brown. Turn chicken, re-cover and fry until light brown. Uncover chicken and allow the fry until it is crisp.

HAMBURGER CASSEROLE

1 pound ground beef
2 tablespoons diced onion
1 cup diced celery
½ cup diced green pepper
1 can tomato soup
1½ cups cooked macaroni
¼ cup water
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon pepper

Cook meat and onion together until meat is brown. Add celery, green pepper, tomato soup, macaroni, water, salt and pepper. Simmer for 10 minutes.

Place in greased 1½-quart casserole, sprinkle with breadcrumbs and bake at 375 degrees for 30 to 40 minutes.

(This can be prepared the day before, refrigerated and then baked.)

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

NEVER-FAIL ROLLS

2 cups lukewarm water
one-third cup sugar
2 packages dry yeast
2 cups plain flour
1 teaspoon salt
2 eggs, well beaten
1 stick margarine or ½ cup vegetable oil, melted
½ cups plain flour

Mix flour, sugar and yeast. Add 2 cups flour and salt and beat until smooth. Add well-beaten eggs, margarine or oil. Add 4 and one-third cups flour.

Let rise 40 minutes or until double in bulk. Punch down and knead until smooth and elastic. Roll out and cut or form into shapes preferred. On a greased cookie sheet, let rise again until doubled in bulk.

Bake in a 350-degree oven until browned.

Makes about 3 dozen rolls.



"The chin a little higher dear. Style depends largely on how the chin is worn, and they are worn quite high at the present." Lady Bracknell (Debbie Deaton, right) gives some advice on the intricacies of London society to Cecily Cardew (Kim Wehunt, left), while Algernon Moncrieff (Clint Williams) looks on.

'Importance Of Being Earnest' At College

The Importance of Being Earnest, a comedy by the British writer Oscar Wilde, will be presented by the Fine Arts Division of Brevard College on April 10, 11, and 12 at 8:00 p.m.

Wilde's comedy which was first performed in 1895 has been called by some dramatists the most perfectly constructed farce of modern times. The sophisticated, delightful comedy set in the 1870's is a clever satire of upper class British manners.

In addition to those pictured above, the cast includes Tom Jones as John Worthing, Liz Howe as Gwendolyn Fairfax, Nan Nance as Miss Prism and Tim Austin as the Rev. Dr. Chasuble. David Rutledge

and John Covey portray the butlers Lane and Merriman.

The comedy designed and directed by Sam Cope with costumes by Claire Cope, will be presented in the Barn Theatre on the Brevard College campus. Admission will be \$2 for adults and \$1 for students. Because of limited seating capacity, advance purchase of tickets is encouraged.

Tickets may be purchased at the box office in the Dunham Music Center from 10 a.m. to 12 noon and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. the weeks of March 31 through April 4, and April 7 through April 11th. No telephone reservations can be taken.

Outreach Worker Is 'Pressing On'

(Editor's note: The following story on Brevard's Selena Robinson is reprinted from The Charlotte Observer.)

BY HELEN MOORE
Observer Food Writer

BREVARD — The time for packing up schoolbooks and worrying about lunch money for her children is past for Selena Robinson. Time has brought change to Brevard and Mrs. Robinson has changed too.

Independent, articulate and confident, she has quietly remade her life since her husband's death. Even her appearance has changed, with a full set of new teeth and a pair of much-needed glasses.

In 1971, when she was 50 years old, Mrs. Robinson learned to drive her husband's car because of her job. One of her husband's last requests was that she learn to drive.

She has discovered a new talent — acting. In 1973, she appeared in Brevard Little Theater's production of "Raisin in the Sun," and last year she had a part in "The Miracle Worker" at Brevard College.

Since 1969, when Mrs. Robinson was hired as an outreach worker for Western Carolina Community Action, Inc., a non-profit agency established to work with low-income people by the Office of Economic Opportunity, she has worked for better housing, recreation and job op-

portunities for Transylvania County's poor, both black and white.

Mrs. Robinson has also worked through black community organizations, such as her church, Bethel A Baptist, and the Citizens Improvement Organization, for desegregation and welfare reform.

In 1962, the Citizens Improvement Organization took the Transylvania Board of Education to federal court to integrate the schools and prevent the out-of-county busing of black children.

"I was the first to go on the stand to testify at federal court. I had never been to court before in my life and it scared me to death.

"I did all right until they said, 'How many children do you have?' and I said, 'Oh, my God — 14!' 'State their names and ages please,' they said. I like to have died but I could," Mrs. Robinson recalls with a laugh.

Through prodding, too, of the black community for better housing, three new units of rental housing for elderly and low-income persons were opened last fall.

Although her work at Western Carolina Community Action involves helping in such diverse programs as transporting the poor and elderly for medical care and finding after-school jobs for needy teen-agers, Mrs. Robinson is especially in-

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