

COMMUNITY MEALS: “ALL ABOUT PEOPLE”

By Jo Radner

Come to the community meals! In all seasons, the people of the Western Oxford Foothills gather together to share public breakfasts, luncheons, and — especially — suppers. For a very reasonable price (which goes to community benefit) you will get an excellent meal, taste a range of local dishes, and even meet the cooks. Breakfasts, luncheons, and suppers celebrate hunting season, the strawberry and blueberry crops, old home days, Thanksgiving and the fall harvest, and religious holidays -- but most often they simply celebrate sociability.

Every town and village in the area puts on suppers, sometimes with the traditional baked beans and casseroles, sometimes featuring fancier menus with roast beef, lobster, or barbecued chicken. Occasionally groups stage historical suppers, with “bean hole beans” baked overnight in a fire-heated hole in the ground, recreating the technology of the old-time logging camps. But most community meals consist of home-cooked items contributed by neighbors. Insiders (and those who ask insiders) can sample the locally famous dishes, the ones that will go into memory. No person of middle years in Lovell can forget Irene Walker’s marvelous pea beans, or Mrs. Libby’s three-inch-thick custard pies.

“The food is great,” says Lovell’s Roberta Chandler, “but the company’s better.” Community meals are “all about people.” Sociability comes first, as neighbors and new friends move along the long rows of tables, exchanging greetings and news. Most sociable of all, of course, are the devoted volunteers who plan the meal, set up the hall, serve food, staff the kitchen, and clean up afterwards. Consider volunteering! Any of the organizations that put on community meals — historical societies, churches, libraries, recreation departments, granges, fire departments, rescue units, veterans’ groups, and community service organizations — will be glad of additional volunteers.

Putting on a supper is hard work, but it’s great camaraderie. Dr. Larry Farmer of Norway, for some 20 years “beanmaster” of the annual Oxford Hills Family Bean Hole Bean Festival, tells of the dramatic night-time watches at the fire-pits, the crews’ ingenious inventions for handling the heavy iron bean pots, and the pranks old-timers played on novices. (Ray Harris, one of the founders of Bean Hole Bean who taught Larry the techniques, was “quite a jokester. ‘Be sure and put this pipe in the ground next to these pots,’ he said. ‘Why’s that?’ ‘Well you know, that lets the gas up, so they’ll be gasless beans!’”)

Growing up in a tradition of community service, Roberta Chandler of Lovell remembers that she marked the stages of growing up by the work she could do at the suppers: at seven, she was allowed to set the tables, by 11 or 12 she could serve food, but she had to wait many years more before she could carry the heavy china coffee pitchers around. And finally, there was serving on the kitchen committee — being one of the masterminds. The work is easier nowadays. She remembers when dinners were served and cleaned up in the days before the Lovell Masonic Hall had running water and electricity, and water (hauled in and then dipped out of immense milk cans) had to be heated on the stove for dishwashing.

The satisfaction of a public meal comes from community benefit as well as companionship. Since time out of mind, suppers have raised funds not only for the activities of voluntary groups, but also, on occasion, for local families experiencing sudden hardships — a

house fire, heavy medical bills. Families never forget how their neighbors have mobilized to help out at critical times. So strong is the tradition of benefit suppers that participation transcends all differences. Roberta Chandler tells the story of a Lovell supper put on many years ago to support a Republican rally. All the Republicans wanted to attend the rally, so Democrats were recruited to run the kitchen — and then had to listen to their own party being lambasted by the after-dinner speaker!

We hope you enjoy the community meals of the Western Oxford Foothills. See your local paper for what's happening this week. Our listings can give only a sampling of the annual round.

For information about Annually Recurring Community Events, consult our data base at <http://www.westernmaineculture.org/WMCAFolk.html>