

Using Cookbooks to Document the Challenges and Solutions of Daily Home Life: The Case of *Personal Recipes*, Vernon BC.

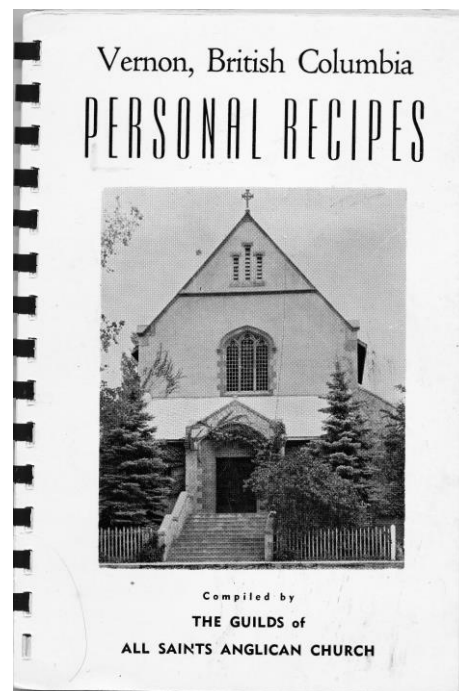
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Julie van Rosendaal (2018) has written that cook books:

...provide more than just instruction; they're aspirational anthologies of our day-to-day lives, connecting us to our past and helping us imagine how we might comfort, nurture and socialize with one another in the future. Older texts have as much to do with history as cookery, documenting the challenges and solutions of everyday life.

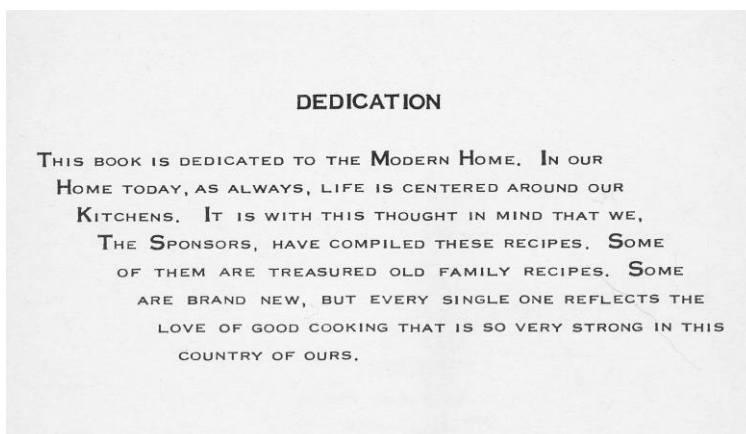
If van Rosendaal is right, what does it mean to read a cookbook as history? And, what challenges and solutions of everyday life might be interpreted from a cookbook of the 1950s?

The Guilds of All Saints Anglican Church in Vernon, British Columbia compiled a 64-page coil bound community cookbook in the 1950s titled *Personal Recipes*. As a community cookbook printed in Kansas City it appears as an early fundraising effort of the Guilds, likely composed entirely of women. Thus the cookbook can be interpreted as a book created by women for women. As such, one can imagine that the women who contributed the recipes either chose their or their family's favourite recipes that they believed would be most useful for other women in the community.



The dedication that appears on the opening page of the book is to the modern home, a "life centered around our kitchens," and "a love of good cooking." There are 88 signed and 4 unsigned contributors of recipes. The majority (56) contributed one recipe, some (31) contributed two, and one person contributed three recipes. Contributors identified themselves in at least five different ways: full name for example Ruth Ruffle, as Mrs. using their name as in Mrs. Ada Varley, as Mrs. using their husband's name as in Mrs. Joe Peters, using no identifying first name as in Mrs. Carew and using no first name as in P.M. Collins. Consistency in name format did not appear to be an issue

and the wide range of formats that contributors chose indicate a vast range in the way women chose to self-identify.



Personal Recipes is organized into eight sections:

Relishes, Pickles and Appetizers. This section contains 11 recipes, 9 for pickles and relishes and only two appetizers. This section begins with a recipe for Green Tomato Soy (a sweet sour relish/pickle) and the comment that "This is adapted from a very old recipe." The recipes in this section indicate that appetizers were not common in the meal patterns of Vernon families at this time.

Soups, Salads, Beverages. This section contains only three recipes, one recipe for Family Salad Dressing with a comment that the recipe is "easily made and inexpensive", one recipe for Lemon Syrup that will make an "easy summer drink" and one recipe for Potato Wine. The size and contents of this section suggests that family meals were likely not multi course with salads and soups as starters. Possibly if salads or soups were served in families, they were made without following a recipe.

Miscellaneous Meat Substitutes, Vegetables – This section contains five recipes: Cheese Rarebit, Sandwich Spread (makes nine pints and is canned in jars), Egg Souffle Salad (molded jelly salad), Ripe Cucumbers as a Vegetable with Cheese Sauce, and Corn Roast (a corn based casserole). Because Vernon is such an abundant vegetable growing area, it's likely that lots of vegetables were served in meals but it is also likely that recipes were not followed and steaming or boiling were the usual methods of preparation.

Meat, Fish, Poultry – This section contains 14 recipes, many simple in preparation and economical in ingredients, for example, Mock Chicken Casserole using canned tuna. Some offer ideas for stretching inexpensive cuts of meat for example Chili Con Carne, or Rullu Pylsa, a spiced rolled lamb flank (a recipe of Icelandic origin), or Porcupine Meat Balls. Casseroles that blend foods and are easy to prepare are also common, for example: Minced Beef Yorkshire Pudding, Dinner on a Dish, Liver Casserole, or Steak and Kidney Pudding. Salmon Loaf and Curried Salmon both use canned salmon. These recipes reflect values of easy preparation (few ingredients, canned foods, casseroles), use of foods on hand (canned salmon), and inexpensive cuts (ground beef, liver, canned tuna and salmon).

Rolls, Pies, Pastries. This section contains 17 recipes in total (2 shortbread, hot water pastry, 4 quick breads, 2 yeast breads, 3 pie recipes, 2 tart recipes (Prize Butter Tarts and Honey Tarts that contain no honey and use "Golden syrup" instead). One recipe for "A Different Lemon Pie" that has the usual lemon pie ingredients except uses gelatin and egg whites beaten stiff and folded into a custard type mixture and served with whipped cream topping.

Mrs. Ada Varley got poetic about Doughnuts and offered her recipe giving ingredients, method and advice in verse form:

DOUGHNUTS

One cup sugar, brown or white
Now add an egg and beat it light
A little salt with spice to taste
Baking powder too, must now be placed.
Three teaspoonful bought of Gillette
I find as good as any yet.
One cup of milk, now stir together
They will prove as light as any feather.
Just flour enough to roll them out
But you must mind what you're about
And keep your lard at proper heat
You'll find these doughnuts hard to beat.

The large number of recipes in this and the next section indicates that baking is prized by these women. Turning out delicious baked goodies for children and husbands, and possibly community social events were likely high priorities for these women and closely tied to their identity as homemakers. Ingredients were simple (dates, walnuts, currants); flavourings readily available (orange, lemon, vanilla), and spices were only in the Quick and Easy Pumpkin Pie recipe that used nutmeg, mace, cinnamon and ginger.

Cakes, Cookies. This section contains 56 recipes. One recipe for Sea Foam Frosting has a commentary: "Very easy and very good." There are 18 recipes for cookies, 29 for cakes, and 9 for squares or bars. Cookie recipes include Rice Krispie Cookies, Date Porcupines, Norwegian Drop Cookies, -- nothing exotic but lots of dates, coconut, and walnuts. Cakes include Wacky Cake, several recipes for fruitcakes, sponge and chiffon cakes, and Hungarian Nut Cake. The preponderance of cake recipes suggest that baking cakes was a frequent activity for these women and that they either love to bake cakes or recognize it as an expectation of their homemaker/mother role that needs to be fulfilled.

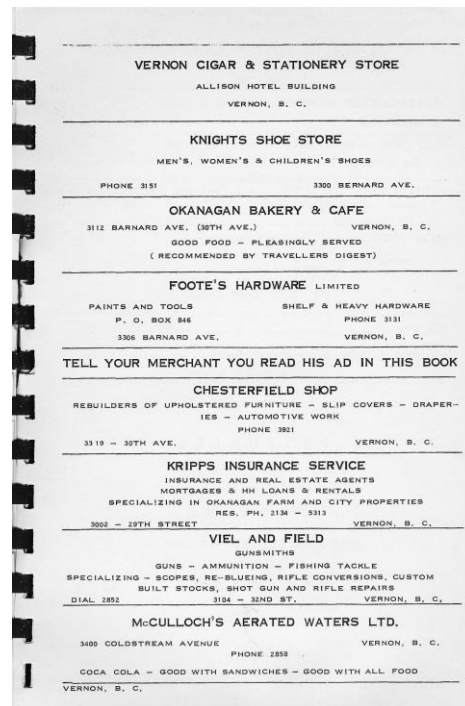
Desserts. This section contains 12 dessert recipes (2 slices, 8 puddings). Ginger Fruit Pudding by Grace Clarke includes 1 package of gingerbread mix in the ingredient list, the first packaged mix in any of the recipes. She also indicates that instead of the mix "Your favourite gingerbread recipe may be used to make this dessert." Pudding recipes include chocolate, lemon, peach, apple, carrot, and plum.

Jelly, Candy, Preserves. This section contains eight recipes, five for candy and three for Orange Marmalade, Red Pepper Jam and Mint Jelly. Candy recipes include: Chocolate Fudge, Nut Brittle, Toffee, Cocoanut Ice, and Butter Nut Crunch.

At the end of each recipe section there are blank pages with the heading "Write Extra Recipes Here:" – an invitation to the user to enter some of their own recipes. In the cookbook I analyzed, no one had written any recipes.

In addition to the recipes in eight sections, there are eight pages of information and advice. These include single pages on: Weights and measures (equivalents as in 1 lb. rice...2 cups), Frozen Foods

(advice on how to defrost and cook frozen foods), Cooking Terms (for example entrée, frappe, fricassee, julienne), Roasting (time and temperatures for roasting all meats), Hints (2 pages on tips about for example how to avoid dry biscuits, soggy bottom pie crusts), Foods to Serve 25 People (for example 1 ½ pints pickles, 10 lbs. pork roast), Take Time for 10 Things (work, think, play, read, worship, help and enjoy friends, love, dream, laugh and plan), Calorie Counters (3 ½ pages of foods and the number of calories each provides) and an Index of Recipes. The cookbook also contains six pages of advertisements for city merchants who sponsored the book and a note of appreciation at the front of the book.



EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION

WE WANT TO EXPRESS OUR APPRECIATION TO ALL THOSE
MERCHANTS WHOSE GENEROUS COOPERATION IN THIS PRO-
JECT MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO PUBLISH THIS BOOK.

WE ALSO WANT TO THANK ALL THOSE PEOPLE WHO GAVE
SO GENEROUSLY OF THEIR TIME AND ENERGY IN COLLECT-
ING AND SUBMITTING RECIPES AND ASSISTED IN THE SALE,
WITHOUT THEIR HELP THIS BOOK WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN
POSSIBLE.

Discussion

If van Rosendaal (2018) is right, what does it mean to read a cookbook as history? *Personal Recipes*, written in the 1950s can be read as a book written primarily by women for women and as a document that can reveal women's lives (McDougall, 1997). I have chosen to analyze this text through a critical interpretive lens. I completed several readings of the text, doing empirical

analysis of the content – the number of contributors, the number of recipes, the kind of ingredients and then considered what was present as well as not present in the text.

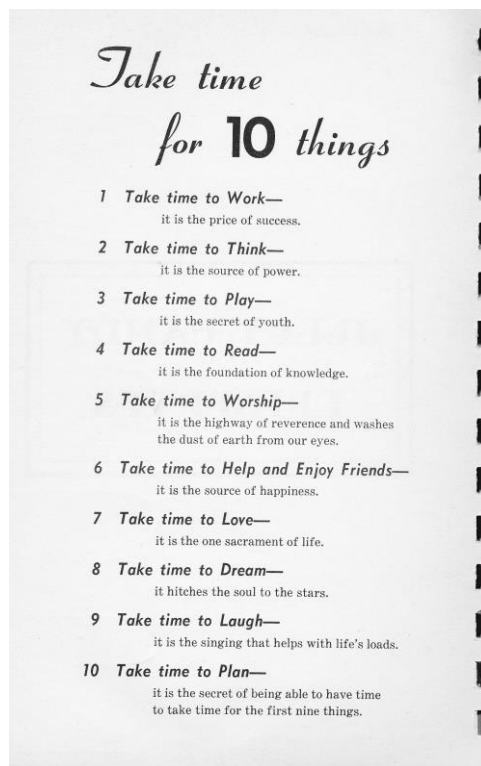
Aspirational anthology of everyday lives

There is a sombre, serious tone to *Personal Recipes* that conveys helpfulness toward other women and the desire to relieve the burdensome nature of food preparation and domesticity. The eight pages of information and advice are further evidence of the helpful supportive tone of the book. McDougall (1997) comments that the writer's voice (and sometimes joy) can come through in commentary on recipes, breaking "the drone of ingredients, measurements, and instructions" (p. 116). The drone is evident in the unimaginative recipe titles in *Personal Recipes* that are very straight forward descriptive, for example Barbecued Spareribs, Salmon Loaf, Two Egg Chiffon Cake, Oatmeal Cookies. No pretensions! The commentaries are mainly helpful, for example "This is a never fail recipe and makes a fairly short pastry" about Hot Water Pastry (p. 17), or "Nice for slicing" about Date Bread (p. 18), or "Very easy and very good" about Sea Foam Frosting (p. 23) or "Watch carefully as they burn quickly" about Walnut Chews (p.25). Rare moments of humour come through in the commentary about Hermits: "These cookies keep well –if well hidden" (p. 27) or "Mmm – Good" about Dream Cake (p. 32) and Mrs. Ada Varley's poetic rendering of her Doughnut recipe (p. 20). The inclusion of a recipe for Potato Wine may indicate that domestic life was not entirely devoid of pleasure and frivolity.

The emphasis on easy quick food preparation reveals the underlying tension of women's role in relation to food in the 1950s. While the recipe emphasis is on simplicity, economy and quick preparation, the dedication of the book highlights the importance of the kitchen as the heart of life in the modern home. While the kitchen is highly valued, we really don't want to spend much time, energy or money to food production. The number of recipes for cakes, cookies and desserts underscores the aspirations of these women to produce glorious sweets for their families and community events rather than nutritious vegetables and fruit.

Some cookbooks aspire to a higher class, idealized perfect product, or pretentious tone but little of this is evident in *Personal Recipes*. The only traces of pretentiousness can be found in some of the "hints" offered. For example, "Toast the nut meats and while hot add a little butter. Then your nut bread will take on a new aristocracy" (p. 16) or "Meringue will always stand up high and perfect if a generous pinch of baking soda is added to beaten whites" (p. 16).

Longone (1997) found that common components of community cookbooks were poetry, prose, or quotations from the Bible on women's duties. Reading a cookbook as history would mean giving attention to the way that the book aspires to improve the quality of community life and the nature of the regional culinary culture that the book records. The contents of *Personal Recipes* suggests that community life can be improved through efficiency, thrift, support for women in fulfilling the role of food preparation in the home and community. The regional culinary culture is more likely evident in the absences and what is taken for granted in this recipe collection. Vernon is an area of the Okanagan abundant in fresh summer vegetables and fruit, yet recipes for vegetables and salads are nearly absent in this recipe book. In conversation with one woman who was a child in the 1950s in Vernon, she commented: "My dad hated salads and so we never had salads. We ate very plain food – meat, potatoes, vegetables."ⁱ



The information page "Take Time for 10 Things" provides a balanced list that encourages the cookbook users to take time for a diverse list of activities that can contribute to a good life. It suggests that the recipe writers are living busy lives with many demands and dimensions beyond family food preparation.

Challenges and solutions of everyday life

The recipes in *Personal Recipes* are written in an earnest straightforward way with some encouraging notes. Their presentation suggests that sharing is important and it is assumed that the reader is quite experienced in food preparation. The method for mixing ingredients in recipes is often very brief. For example the recipe for Rice Krispie Cookies lists 12 ingredients and the instructions given are: "Roll in small balls. Press down with a fork. Bake at 350 degrees for 10-12 minutes" (p. 23). It is assumed that the reader will know how to proceed with combining and mixing the 12 ingredients listed!

The challenges of everyday that *Personal Recipes* attempts to address include how to provide interesting, inexpensive baking and meals for husbands, children, family and community members. Food that is not too high in calories and is quick and easy to make is important because women are taking active roles in their church and community. They lead active multi-dimensional and demanding lives in which the preparation of food for families is only one task among many.

Bower (1997) suggests that cookbooks contain many elements of story and outlines four different common plots she found in cookbooks. The integration plot "involves a communal autobiography of social acceptance and achievement. This is a modest text where the main story is one of the authors achieving assimilation and status through their acceptance of the larger society's conventions and standards" (p. 38). This plot is mostly evident in *Personal Recipes* through its lack of challenging, edgy or controversial recipes or advice. The Potato Wine recipe is certainly the most

unconventional but its simple inexpensive ingredients make it consistent with the general theme of thrift and economy in the cookbook.

Longone (1997) traces the origin of community charitable cookbooks to the era following the American Civil War and a movement that continues into the present. She claims that at a time when women were without full political participation and representation, they found the community cookbook was a way to participate in the public life of the nation. Similarly, Bower (1997) claims the dominant theme of community cookbooks is breaking the silence and coming to public voice of women often denied that voice in other public places. The cookbook grew out of women's organizations that were a training ground for women's participation in public and social spaces. The information page "Foods to Serve 25 People" that appears in *Personal Recipes* suggests that women were often responsible for entertaining large numbers of people possibly in family gatherings but also in community social events such as receptions, dances and picnics.

Connecting to the past and imagining the future

Personal Recipes, written in the 1950s portrays women's lives at that time in a small British Columbia city. Community cookbooks could have a place in the home economics classroom by helping adolescent students to understand the lives of their parents and grandparents. What might they learn by reading cookbooks from the 1980s and 90s and the 1950s and 60s? The books do reveal solutions to the practical problem of what should be eaten daily to maintain health and wellbeing. They indicate through the ingredients used, the extent to which advertising, commercial interests and an industrial model of the home influenced everyday life. They reveal the state of gender equality in the home in relation to food preparation. They speak to the attitudes and significance we give to food in our lives, the values and rituals that surround the food we eat.

Conclusions

Food preparation was something to be done in the easiest, quickest, most simple way possible in the era in which *Personal Recipes* was written. The recipes suggest that the women who contributed them were not gourmet cooks but rather concerned with providing food for their families in an economic and efficient manner. The recipes the women contributed were ones they would recommend to a friend or "fellow" homemaker – something easy, quick, likely to satisfy or please their family without requiring too much time or labour. Food preparation was a task that in this era of the 1950s was the responsibility mainly of women working isolated in their home kitchens. Food preparation was not shared but recipes through community cookbooks were. But the cookbooks served to sustain an isolation in the kitchen that is implied through the desire for simple efficient preparation. Food was not honoured, glorified, revered or shared in preparation but rather fell into the industrial model of efficiency and division of labour.

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ⁱ Conversation, February 7, 2019