



A Look Back in Time...

These days, many families grab fast food or frozen dinners from their local grocery store instead of preparing an evening meal from scratch. They have a litany of excuses, including a lack of time. Any excuse would pale in comparison to the chore of preparing dinner in "the good old days". The kitchen exhibit at the Casa Grande Valley Historical Museum gives one a good idea of how hard, hard really is.

The center piece of the kitchen is the large cast iron, wood-burning stove. Bringing forth a meal from a wood-burning stove was a real challenge. Most of the stoves had six burners, actually only flat circles on which to place the heavy cast iron cooking vessels. The compartments at the top of the stove kept the daily bread warm both as the dough was rising and after the bread was baked. Regulating the temperature was a difficult but necessary skill that each housewife needed to learn. Three or four dampers were present and had to be adjusted according to what was being cooked. The type and quantity of the wood also played a part in controlling the temperature. Generally a young family member was assigned the task of keeping the wood bucket filled and emptying the ashes from the pan under the grate. The worst chore was the daily task of polishing the stove with a black waxy substance to keep it from rusting.

To aid in the preparation of dinner the kitchen usually held a free-standing metal cupboard. Ours has a metal-lined drawer to hold bread, a hopper and sifter to dispense flour, and a small shelf on which to prepare food. The top and bottom of the unit holds dishes and supplies such as baking soda and powder, salt and pepper, etc. Because most houses did not have running water, a small hand pump connected to a well or cistern sat on the edge of the counter and provided the water needed to prepare the meal and to clean up afterward. A pan under the counter held the overflow, which was emptied into the yard. No complaints from the children about emptying a dishwasher; however, they argued over whose turn it was to wash and whose it was to dry the dishes. Some things never change.

Other items in our kitchen were common to many homes of the era. A ceramic butter churn, a metal container and ladle for drinking water (everyone used the same ladle), and a hand-cranked meat grinder are just some of the items. One bright spot was often the hand-embroidered dish towels and the crocheted pot holders the women and girls of the household had created in their spare time. Yes, they did have spare time, in spite of the difficult daily task of preparing something from the kitchen.



A Kitchen Challenge

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