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Sharing faith through food a tasty tradition at Wells County Fair

Tanya Watterud

The smell of home cooking filled the building on the Wells County Fairgrounds in Fessenden on the first night of the county fair. It was almost suppertime, and people began streaming in, some requesting burgers that were being flipped on a hot grill, others taking a treat of dessert and coffee.

The comfort food seemed to be the big seller, though — hot beef sandwiches covered in gravy atop homemade mashed potatoes, served on real plates, not paper ones. Coffee was served in a real cup, and dishes were washed as soon as people finished enjoying their meals. Sharing faith through food is a longtime tradition at the fair for members of St. Augustine's in Fessenden.

Marion Eldredge, who now lives in Wisconsin, said she remembers when the parishioners served hamburgers in a small area with no plumbing under the grandstand. Eventually, they built a stand of their own, and now they're in a large building across from the grandstand with enough tables and chairs for a few dozen people.

"We'd make coffee in big enamel coffee pots on gas stoves," Eldredge said. "They'd stir an egg into the grounds and drop that into the boiling water. It was wonderful coffee, but carrying the big pots was amazing." The men would fry hamburgers. "The aroma, of course, was just so appealing," she said.

Many tasks are associated with the fair food fundraiser that the church women established long ago. "Often, someone would sleep out in the stand because there was a threat of people breaking into it," Eldredge said. She remembers her brother sleeping in a sleeping bag on top of a table.

The women would make pies and soups for the day and evening shifts for which they were assigned. One man's specialty was homemade baked beans. "Those were a big hit," Eldredge said. "Especially the carnival workers, who might never get a home-cooked meal, really enjoy the homemade soups and pies."

She recalled waiting on tables when she was about 10 years old and as a teenager. There was no cashier in those days. People would pay at the tables, and the young girls would have to make change, something they had little experience with. "One time, I remember a group of men were fighting over who would pay for the meal," she said. "I thought, 'oh please, somebody pay.'"

She and her husband, Charlie, lived in St. Paul, Minn., after they were married, but moved back to Fessenden in 1975, staying until 2001. They often worked the food stand for the Sunday turkey dinners. "It could be 100 degrees and people were lined up down the midway to get in for the Sunday turkey dinner," she said.

Janice Kanwischer has helped with the food stand for several years. She said she remembers the many times her husband joined in the cooking. "When they fried hamburgers, you'd go to bed with a hamburger," she said with a laugh, noting that the smell wouldn't leave the cooks even when they showered. Also, cutting onions "used to be the hardest job to get people to do," she said. Now, they have a potato peeler and onion cutter that makes the job easier.

Ruth Mack co-chaired the food stand project for about 30 years. "You'd work with the same person all the time and you'd just know what they were going to do," she said. "I was back at the stove most of the time" and she recalled making "lots and lots of gravy." She said it takes at least a dozen volunteers to fill a shift, with extra help needed from about 4:30 to 7 p.m.

Like Eldredge, Mack recalled waiting on tables in the early days. "Waiting tables was horrendous because the ground was so bumpy," she said. The stand had a dirt floor back then. Eventually they added gravel that they had to rake every day to try to keep smooth. The new building they built 25 years ago has a concrete floor.

Kanwischer said a hamburger and fries used to sell for 50 cents in the 1950s, and a full dinner of meat, mashed potatoes, gravy, vegetables, salad, coleslaw, homemade bun, dessert and coffee went for \$1.25. Each shift that worked would try to beat the previous shift in the amount of money it raised.

Mack said the money from the food stand has been a great benefit to the parish. It helped complete the new church in 1975, and the rectory soon after. Planning for the church stand takes many hours of meetings and work. "They talked church stand from January through August," Kanwischer said. Her aunt and mother would hire girls from Bremen to care for their children during the fair so they could work at the food booth. Mack added, "You just did it. You knew you were working out here."

The night crew of workers takes the dish towels home to launder them for the next day, and the early shift peels potatoes for the late shift and vice versa. "The camaraderie, you know, everyone pulls together," Kanwischer said. "Once you get here, it's fun, no matter what you do. There's always laughter."

Eldredge didn't make it back to Fessenden for the fair this year, but her daughter was among those working at the church booth. "I commend the people who are continuing with it and working so hard," she said, "not only for the church, but for the community and the county."