

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 5, 2012

**A Pinch of Salt:** Many generations of housewives, many of them excellent cooks, had homemade recipe books, in which they would write relatives' or good friends' recipes, as they received them. Always handwritten, these recipes were quite specific in some instructions but allowed flexibility on the part of the cook in others. There were other examples, but a "pinch of salt" is the one nebulous instruction that comes to mind.

A "pinch of salt" could be used in almost all recipes, whether it was a gourmet delight for a cooked dinner, a scrumptious dessert, or special homemade pickles. Each cook had a different definition of "pinch," but the end product was usually delicious.

We have excellent cooks today, and they make the most of their modern kitchens and the numerous appliances available. I am fortunate to know many who qualify in this category. But I marvel at what cooks (mostly women) of the 19th and early 20th centuries could manufacture in their old-fashioned kitchens. While I remember earlier Christmases, December 25, 1933, is the one that stands out as the first time I enjoyed the wide and varied menu as produced by my Grandmother Shallcross and her daughters at her home in Middletown. Coming in the dining room door was the way almost everyone entered her house, and the early kitchen, little changed from 1876 when the house was built, was next to it, but was one or two steps below, with an uneven brick floor and no heat except for the cook stove. The stove was similar to the one Lou Mandich and his helpers moved back into the basement of Auburn Heights about three weeks ago: heavy cast iron with an oven and firebox toward the bottom and a flat surface above the oven that would get very hot from the fire and from conduction, which was used as a cooktop is used today, but with limited temperature control. Shelves for keeping dishes warm were behind and above the cooking area. A stove pipe extended from the firebox vertically and immediately behind the stove that connected into a chimney. There would always be a wood box alongside, with kindling and heavier pieces, and the cook knew just how much wood to use to produce the desired temperature. The largest object of the year, a basted fresh-killed turkey of up to 30 pounds, would take several hours to roast, but it always came out perfect, with "light meat," "dark meat," and stuffing available from the big bird. From this one stove came about five or six cooked vegetables for the dinner table, climaxed by homemade cakes and pies. No wonder this nine-year-old had a "tummy ache" following dinner, but it was short-lived. My grandmother, who died in 1944, never had an electric or a gas stove.

My Grandmother Marshall, while operating from a more comfortable kitchen at Auburn Heights, also knew only an old-style cookstove, fired by wood. My mother inherited this kitchen with its stove in 1921, and she never saw an electric stove until 1932, when she and my father rented a small duplex in Southern Pines, North Carolina, for three months. It had a small Hotpoint with an electric oven and three early style electric burners alongside. She immediately fell in love with it, and when the new kitchen was built on the rear of Auburn Heights in 1933–34, it featured a large, although used, electric stove. My mother, her mother, my wife, Ruth, and her mother were all excellent cooks, regardless of their stoves. That "pinch of salt" made the difference.