

Olekeeks

by Lynne Belluscio

In the 1850s it was the custom to visit friends on New Year's Day, but it was considered by many to be bad luck to go out before someone had walked into your home (which makes you wonder who decided to brave their luck to go out first).

Susan Fenimore Cooper published a diary "*Rural Hours*" about her life in Cooperstown, New York in the 1850s. "Monday, January 1st – New Year's. Light, half cloudy day; very mild ... excellent sleighing. The usual visiting going on in the village; all gallant spirits are in motion, from very young gentlemen of five or six, to their grandpas, wishing "Happy New Year" to the ladies. In this part of the world we have a double share of holiday presents, generous people giving at New Year's as well as Christmas. The village children run from house to house wishing "Happy New Year" and expecting a cookie, or a copper, for the compliment. This afternoon we saw them running in and out of the shops also; among them were a few grown women on the same errand. These holiday applicants at the shops often receive some trifle, a handful of raisins, or nuts; a ribbon, or a remnant of cheap calico for a sun bonnet. Some of them are in the habit of giving a delicate hint as to the object they wish for, especially the older girls and women: "Happy New Year – and we'll take it out in tea" – "or sugar" – "or ribbon," as the case may be."

I looked in the *LeRoy Gazette* and in 1852 it appears that some of the stores were open on New Year's Day: "New Year's Calls – The ladies and gentlemen of LeRoy and vicinity are hereby notified that Bryant & Annin will keep open doors to receive calls at any hour from 8 o'clock AM to 8 o'clock PM on New Year's Day to exhibit the cheapest, most beautiful extensive assortment of fancy goods ever offered in this village. The assortment embraces so great a variety that an enumeration would be burdensome and must be seen to be appreciated. Calls at any hour previous to that time attended to with promptness



though given but in a whisper."

New Year's day traditions can be traced to the Dutch in the Hudson River area where the open house was overseen by the women who offered cherry bounce, cookies, honey cakes and "olykoeks" (which is like a deep fried doughnut hole). The men would travel around visiting friends. The Dutch traditions were accepted by the English and the custom spread throughout the country.

The year after his inauguration, George Washington opened his house to the public and continued to receive visitors on New year's Day throughout the seven years he lived in Philadelphia. At one time the local newspapers listed the houses that would be open on New Year's day, but soon the crowds became overwhelming. Eventually the open houses were by invitation only.

New Year's Day treats not only included the deep fried Dutch olekeeks but thin crisp wafers baked in a special wafer iron (much like an Italian pizzel iron.) They also served "Knickerbockers" which were spiced, chewy, honey cakes made in a wooden mold with a design.

Many early cookbooks included recipes

for New Year's Cakes. Amelia Simmons's 1796 cookbook includes a New Year's Cake made with five pounds of sugar, 4 pounds of butter, 6 eggs, yeast and caraway seeds.

Miss Leslie's New Cookery Book of 1857 also includes a recipe for New Year's Cake made with caraway but the dough is rolled out and cut into oval or long cakes, pricked with a fork and baked in a shallow pan. These cakes were probably more like

a thick cake-like cookie. Leslie noted that "The bakers in New York ornament these cakes with devices or pictures fiased by a wooden stamp."

Mrs. LeRoy's cookbook of 1823 does not contain a recipe for New Year's cake, but she does have two recipes for the Dutch olekeeks. Perhaps Charlotte LeRoy prepared the traditional olekeeks for her friends who came to call on New Year's Day.

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