

Brick Ovens That I Have Known

by Lynne Belluscio

A couple of weeks ago, I received a request for information about brick ovens from a man in Richmond, Massachusetts. He has a saltbox house that was built about 1785. The fireplaces and brick oven were removed a long time ago and he wants to replace them.

He came across the 1982 published proceedings of the Dublin Seminar "Foodways in the Northeast" which included my research on brick ovens. The problem was, when they published the dimensions of the 32 ovens that I had measured, the captions were wrong, and the depth, height and width were listed wrong. So I explained the error and hopefully he will find an oven that will fit into his house.

After I took a look at the files that I had put together over 35 years ago, I realized that I need to update the work and include all the ovens that I have measured and photographed since then. It's a strange kind of research - I often say it was like being the witch in Hanzel and Gretel - - climbing into all those ovens.

I started collecting information after attending a summer workshop on Open Hearth Cooking at the Farmer's Museum in Cooperstown in 1973. I came home and told my husband that I wanted to tear out a wall in our house and build a cooking fireplace and oven. Believe it or not, he thought it was a good idea. (It amuses me to read about all the outdoor "pizza ovens" that are being built today).

Well, before we could start the project I had to find brick ovens in the area. I just happened to learn that they were building the fireplace and oven in the MacKay house at Genesee Country Museum and made arrangements to photograph the construction. What was even better, I met Helmut Daehan, the German mason who was building the oven.

In the meantime, I went

around looking at old ovens, and discovered my "favorite" oven in Little Canada. I even had a chance to fire it up, and found that it worked like a charm! It was so superior to any other oven that I had fired, that I took Helmut to see it. The mystery was solved, when it was discovered that the oven had a beautiful smoke chamber in the throat of the chimney. Of course the oven was about twice as big as we needed. It was five foot deep and held 24 loaves of bread! When we built our oven in 1976, we duplicated the opening dimensions exactly, and put in the all-important smoke chamber, but shortened the oven to three feet. It holds plenty of bread.

The oven works on retained heat. A fire is built in the oven and the bricks absorb the heat. At first the bricks turn black, but as the bricks absorb more heat the bricks begin to clean off. It's similar to what happens in a fireplace, at the back, where the heat is the hottest. After about an hour, there's enough heat in the oven and the coals can be shoveled out. The best bread is baked right on the bricks, so you have to sweep it out with a wet broom.

There are several ways to determine the temperature. Some throw a little flour in on the brick floor and if it turns black, it's too hot and if it just browns then it's ok. I stick my arm in and count. If I can count to eight, it's the right temperature for bread. A friend of mine counts to 20, but she counts faster than I do. After the bread is put in, a wooden door shuts off the oven and the flue. "And how long do you leave the bread in the oven?" - - "Until it's done!"

When the early settlers came into Western New York and built their houses, it was necessary to build a large cooking fireplace and a brick oven. The cast iron stove was still a new fangled thing that wouldn't become popular until the 1840s. The



stove trade increased with the iron foundry business in Albany and the opening of the Erie Canal which made it possible to ship the heavy contraptions by canal boat. And even when the new-fangled stoves were installed, it required all new cooking equipment.

Instead of the round-bottomed kettles and tall footed fry pans, all the cookware had to have flat bottoms. In addition, the little box oven wasn't big enough for more than two pies, or a couple of loaves of bread. And without the huge fireplace, with a reflector oven for meat, many people had to put the reflector in front of the stove with the doors open to roast beef or a turkey.

Many people believed that the stove restricted the flow of air in the house because it had a damper. The fireplace was like an open window. I always

thought that people regarded the stove much like we thought of the microwave when it first came into the kitchen. Although it saved energy - - firewood, it required new cooking utensils, and wasn't big enough, and wasn't good for meat. And it wasn't healthy to have in the kitchen. As they say, history repeats itself ...

There are quite a few brick ovens in the area. Some of them are in remarkable condition. Others are in ruins. Nevertheless, each oven has a story to tell. And I'm always interested in finding another to photograph and measure. Give me a call if you know of one. I'll be going to a museum conference in Pennsylvania later this spring and will be presenting the oven information to a new group.

