

# Meatless Dishes Among the Volga Germans of Ellis County, Kansas

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The purpose of my paper is to discover the accommodations which the Volga German people who settled in Ellis County, Kansas made to the Catholic religion in their eating habits. Did they make major adjustments to their religion, or were their eating habits mainly a reflection of the food materials that were available?¹

To study my problem of the adjustment to their religion which the Volga Germans made in their eating habits, I interviewed people from all ages and economic levels. I was fortunate to find a priest who was a native of Ellis County and whose family had come with the original group to the county. He said the rule of the Church was that Catholics could not eat meat on Fridays and that during Lent they could eat meat but once a day on other days. He said, however, that some families took special personal vows of not eating meat on other days of the week; Wednesday was usually the day. He said his family and all the families he knew followed the strict rule of the Church. However, I found several variant patters reported—such as one older woman from a rather poor family who reported that her family could not eat meat between meals if the people were between the ages of twenty-one to sixty. Her explanation was that they felt the young and older people needed more nourishment.

A common variation which was reported by nearly all age and economic groups was that men who were doing hard physical labor were permitted to eat meat on Fridays. One source said the women resented this because they felt that the women who washed clothes on the scrub board were doing harder physical labor than the men who simply drove the horses and machinery to work in the fields. One older woman reported a variant pattern that her family could not eat both fish and meat together during Lent when she was a child. Another older person reported that when she was a child, her family could eat only

¹Because I found such wide variation in names of the dishes from informant to informant, I will not use the Volga German terms in my paper.

corn meal mush on Fridays, and she had been told that this was a church restriction. Her family was in the poorest economic group, for one member starved to death in Russia. My conclusion is that the younger the people were, the more lenient they became in adapting their eating habits to their religion. Also the poorer the people were, the more they relied on religion to aid them in accepting their hardships.

My first informant was a woman in her sixties who came from the highest economic level; her family were farmers, and her father ran a butcher shop. She said that she remembered as a child they were unable to eat meat on Fridays even if they knew it would spoil. Her mother wondered about the waste of food. They did, however, have the custom of partially cooking the meat to prevent its spoiling, and they were permitted to use bacon drippings in their cooking.

Another informant who was also in her sixties and who was from the lowest economic level said they could eat only corn meal mush on Fridays. The children were under the impression this was because of their religious beliefs. The informant also said that in her childhood the Church did not allow them to eat bacon drippings, but if they used anything for frying, they had to use butter, which they had boiled until it was clear. She said also that the Church later became more lenient. However, when I checked with the priest, he felt the family simply followed a stricter diet because of the extreme poverty. A younger woman informant said they had been permitted by their priest to eat meat on Fridays if they were positive it would spoil if they kept it over a day. But the priest interviewed assured that this was absolutely contrary to the rule of the Church and that no priest would have given such permission.

As a result of their beliefs, the people used many meatless dishes, which were common to all groups. Of course, they used eggs. A common adaptation was called "dried eggs"; first they were scrambled, with flour, salt, and pepper added, and then they were fried.

Another food used by all informants among the Volga Germans was dumplings, cooked either in water or meat broth depending on the religious leniency of the family. I found three variant types of dumpling dough reported—bread dough, biscuit dough, and regular dumpling dough. The bread dough was let rise on a floured board and then put into the skillet on the top of the stove by generous handfuls, as one informant gestured (about one cup, she thought). She had earlier fried onions in butter—or later, as she felt her Church permitted, in bacon drippings. (Some people also added potatoes or whatever vegetable they had.) She then added water until the skillet was half-full. Then she put on a tight-fitting lid, warning me not to take it off until the water crackled, indicating the food was done. If the lid was removed, of

course the dough would fall. She said that sometimes her mother would add barley to the water or when they had cream they would add that—which, by the way, I found to be a common additive to dishes. One informant said her mother always put a clean tea towel under the lid to prevent the drippings from dropping back down on the dumplings, and thus they looked more attractive when they were served.

Several informants said they used biscuit dough for the dumplings and cooked them in the same manner. Others used a regular dumpling recipe. When they used this dough, I am told, they could raise the lid to check on the progress of the cooking. Several women said that when they cooked dumplings they sometimes filled them with cottage cheese. The dumpling dough was rolled into flat squares and filled with cottage cheese, and sometimes eggs, salt, and pepper; some also added cinnamon. After these were filled, they were sealed and cooked. One younger woman used a variant form of adding cream cheese filling. All informants mentioned that they added sauerkraut to the dumplings. One very popular meal was dumplings and watermelon. This seemed to please all ages. One woman I interviewed was married to a convert to the Catholic religion; he said the best meal he had ever eaten was dumplings served with watermelon. One of the older women, whose grandnephews are batching together while attending the University of Kansas, said when the boys were asked how they could cook, they replied they could serve one really good meal—dumplings and watermelon.

Noodles were also popular. Several informants used the term “finger” noodles, thus indicating the size. Recipes varied, always however including flour, eggs, and enough water to make a “nice” dough, as one informant said. When I asked what she meant by “nice” dough, she replied one that did not stick to her fingers. She also said they could not use meat drippings or stew juice left from meat to cook noodles on Fridays but instead they cooked by stewing on top of the stove in water, much as they did dumplings. Volga German housewives also fried noodles, which my older informants said had to be fried in butter or fresh lard and not meat drippings on Fridays. One of my older informants said her family had wide-cut noodles which they cooked with cottage cheese, egg, and onion. She added the comment that some of the younger women were now cooking this dish, but they used packaged lasagna noodles. One older man said that as a boy he especially enjoyed noodles cooked in milk, which they then called “milk soup.” He also said that his mother frequently made noodles out of a sweet dough.

Soup was common—as I just mentioned, noodle soup cooked in water, or milk, or cream. The Volga Germans ate Navy bean soup, and the custom was to serve the bean soup and noodle soup in separate

bowls on the table but for each member of the family to mix them in their own bowls. Some ate simply a cream and butter soup. All informants referred to a "marble soup"—dumplings rolled into small balls. This was particularly used because the families in the early days were all patrilocal and had an extended family unit; thus the making of these small balls provided something useful for the older women to do with their time. All informants were familiar with "fruit soup"—dried fruits which were browned in flour, then put into water, cooked, and served hot. One of the younger men commented he did not like this soup! What my informants called "sick soup" was a soup made from water, onion, and a little butter; it was served not only when they were sick, but at other times as well. My youngest informant, whose father had been a convert, mentioned vegetable soup—meatless on Fridays.

Potatoes were common and were used in many ways. Mashed potatoes, to which flour and eggs were added, were baked to a stiff-like little loaf of bread. Potato cakes were fried. Cottage cheese was another favorite food. The women would squeeze the cheese dry, then hang it in a bag on the clothes line and later fry it. All informants mentioned fish—smoked, caught fresh if they were lucky enough to live on Big Creek or branches of the Smokey Hill River, or "frozen" as they were referred to when they were shipped in by freight and packed in ice.

My conclusions, after visiting with a priest and with many informants of all ages and economic backgrounds and having lived in the area for most of my life, are that the Volga Germans in Ellis County served many meatless dishes. The poorer the people were, the more they served meatless dishes both on Friday and other days because they were economical. They made an effort to accommodate to poverty in the direction pointed out by their religion, of using the meatless dishes. While all the people maintained adherence to the general outlines of the Church doctrines, there seemed to be some variation in following what the people felt them to be. If they were more lenient, they said the priest gave permission; or if they were stricter, they seemed to be caused by greater poverty, and the greater leniency by human frailty.

One of my middle-aged informants said, as she reminisced about cooking in the former days, that the food tasted so good, but now, as she thinks about it, it probably would seem too greasy. Another older woman said, "You can see why we are all so fat, when you look at the food we ate."