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America Eats!: On The Road With The WPA - The Fish Fries, Box Supper Socials, And Chitlin Feasts That Define Real American Food



Synopsis

What the Sterns did for road food, Pat Willard does for festive American group eating in this exploration of our national cuisine, with a never-before-published WPA manuscript as her guide. In *America Eats!* Pat Willard takes readers on a journey into the regional nooks and crannies of American cuisine where WPA writers—including Eudora Welty, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Nelson Algren, among countless others—were dispatched in 1935 to document the roots of our diverse culinary cuisine. With the unpublished WPA manuscript as her guide, Willard visits the sites of American food's past glory to rediscover the vibrant foundation of America's traditional cuisine. She visits a booyah cook-off in Minnesota, a political feast in Mississippi, a watermelon festival in Oklahoma, and a shepherders ball in Idaho, to name a few. Featuring recipes and never-before-seen photos, including those from the WPA by Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Marion Post Wolcott, *America Eats!* is a glowing celebration of American food, past and present.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I collect cookbooks and also enjoy reading history books so "America Eats" is a perfect combination to grab my interest. The original idea for America Eats was a part of the endeavors of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. Out-of-work writers were sent all across the country and were to submit reports on group eating and its role in the various communities. Some reports were sent to Washington, but funding was discontinued before any final document report was assembled and printed. Some reports were retained in local offices and some reports have been totally lost. Pat Willard went to the Library of Congress and read some of the reports housed

there. Brimming with enthusiasm, she set off across the United States to visit the areas that had been documented. She was hoping to find some of the festivals and group dinners still being held. This book is a combination of many of the original reports submitted in the late 1930s and Willard's reports on similar festivals, picnics, and other celebrations she found. This book is not a cookbook in the usual sense but does have about 25 recipes as originally reported or with Willard's modern interpretation based on her travels. I found the book to be an enjoyable read. It is easy to pick up and read a few pages when having only a few minutes or a pleasure for a longer read. There are about 50 black and white photos from the original project included. Some of the chapters cover various ethnic group influences on the eating habits of our country's people. Church suppers, funeral dinners, fairs, fund raisers, holiday celebrations, political gatherings: they all received their due recognition.

During the Great Depression, many programs were created by the Federal Government to provide jobs for those who had none. We are still benefitting today from the fruits of that labor which created many public buildings, roads, bridges and parks. One project, however, never saw the light of day. The "America Eats!" project was about traditional American food. Out-of-work writers were assigned to write about the events in their communities and the food that was served at them. The final document was not meant to be a cookbook. It was more akin to a documentation of regional foods made by non-professional cooks and served at regional gatherings such as fairs, church socials and harvest festivals. Author Pat Willard, who stumbled on to the project while reading a book for research, was intrigued enough to visit the Library of Congress where many of the original manuscripts are stored. Reading the surviving documents inspired her to make a cross-country culinary tour, visiting the places and events written about in "America Eats!" to find out if they still existed and if so, how they had changed if at all. She was heartened to discover that many of the local events mentioned in America Eats! are still going on albeit with a few modern changes. Squirrel meat, once the main ingredient in Brunswick stew, has been replaced by poultry, beef and pork due to the dangers of Mad Squirrel Disease (who knew?). She traces the evolution of the foodie culture in Washington State from the local harvest festivals mentioned in America Eats!, which are still going on. Other local gatherings never made it to the 21st century. The traditional southern barbecues that were once mandatory for political events have disappeared.

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