ELECTRIC JELL-O

REFRIGERATION BROUGHT THE JIGGLE TO RURAL APPALACHIA

by Lora Smith

Electric Orange, ***oil on panel by Lina Tharsing.***

I've long believed in the alchemical properties of Jell-O, a powder made from ligament and bone. Add water, and all of a sudden you have a brightly colored, gelatinous solid.

My fascination started as a child with trips to the D&W cafeteria in Corbin, Kentucky. These outings were amazing for two reasons. One, I could get anything I wanted. Two, the dessert case never disappointed. After winding around the metal counter pushing a marbled plastic tray, I was electrified by the mountains of translucent green, perfectly cubed Jell-O neatly portioned in parfait cups.

Along with 7Up, a cure-all tonic in my mother's house, Jell-O was a healing food. It was my sustenance on sick days home from school.

After my second child was born, I discovered that, along with the miracle of birth and the awe of a precious new life, there was a call button I could push on my hospital bed that would prompt a Jell-O delivery. I think I pushed that button more than the one that delivered pain medication, struck by wonder each time a nurse appeared with an aluminum foil–sealed cup of orange or red Jell-O.

Jell-O drove me into the archives at Berea College to explore a collection of oral histories with mountain women that documented shifting Appalachian foodways. The majority of the women were born in the 1930s and hailed from eastern Kentucky and West Virginia. The interviews highlight traditional preservation techniques, the effects of rationing during World War II, and changes to Appalachian tables over time. That all sounded fascinating, but I was there for the Jell-O. I had heard that many of the women mentioned it in their interviews, and I wanted to know why.

The voices in the archives speak of hardscrabble farm living. Families grew, put up, and cooked almost all of what they ate. Every member of the family worked subsistence gardens that provided fresh vegetables. Meat was primarily chicken, pork, or wild game that they processed to store for winter. The women recall harvesting and foraging fruit from plentiful orchards and brambles. They talk about apples, blackberries, quinces, peaches, mulberries, plums, cherries, wild grapes, persimmons, pawpaws, and raspberries. Desserts were for special occasions. Holiday treats included sorghum-covered popcorn balls, buttermilk candy, fudge, and vinegar taffy. In the summer months, they baked fresh fruits into pies and cobblers.

Jell-O ephemera from the collection of Margaret Dotson at the Berea College archives.

Margaret Dotson/Berea College Archives

After World War II, something happened in the kitchen. In many of the stories, Jell-O marked and divided a shift in home cooking. I came to think of time in Before Jell-O and After Jell-O eras. It seemed strange that Jell-O emerged suddenly as the first commercially processed food embraced by the women of rural Appalachia, especially since gelatin dishes had been popular in the United States—even in Appalachian cities—since the early 1900s.

The *Club House Cook Book* (1929), complied by members of the Charleston, West Virginia Woman's Club, contains an extensive "Frozen Salads and Desserts" section. It features gems like Mrs. Cora Delaney Fox's Sweet Breads Salad, an aspirational dish of equal parts sweetbreads (yes, the thymus gland of a cow), celery, and "a good mayonnaise," held together inside a tomato gelatin mold.

Reading the interviews, it became obvious that Jell-O stood out in the minds of rural mountain women because it signaled the time when power lines finally snaked their way up rural mountainsides. The appearance of Jell-O in remote Appalachian kitchens was a direct result of rural families connecting to mainstream American culture through the very real connectivity of going on the grid. In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) as part of his New Deal policies, with the goal of spreading electricity and telephone services to the nation's most rural areas.

Kentucky Historical Society/ExploreKYHistory

Congress authorized the entity the following year. The program offered low-interest and long-term loans to governments, farmer cooperatives, and nonprofits to run power lines to isolated areas.

Kentucky was among the least electrified states at the start of the REA's work: Only three percent of the state's farms had electricity. Fewer than ten percent of West Virginia farms were electrified. In the Berea oral history collection, most of the interviewees reported that their electricity came in the early 1950s.

Prior to electricity, families used traditional preserving methods to store food for slim winters. They cured hams, canned blackberries, strung beans to dry, and fermented cabbage for sauerkraut.

Betty Bailey was born in 1937 in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Her family got electricity 1953. She recalled eating canned beef, preserved fruits, and sauerkraut in the days before refrigeration. "When I was a little girl, I remember mother had the big stone jar that she'd put her sauerkraut down in," she said. "She'd cut that cabbage and I thought that was the best stuff when you'd just put the salt on it, you know, after you'd fresh-cut it. Oh my gosh, I almost made myself sick just by eating that."

Addie Bicknell was born in 1920 in Red Lick, Kentucky, and remembered how her mother prepared apples to store for the winter months. "She'd put them in sacks, like cloth sacks, and put a stick

The Rural Electrification Administration at work in Kentucky.

across a barrel and hang a sack on each side and cover it over," she told an interviewer, "and then light that sulfur wood and cover it and let the apples get that smoke. Let it stay so long until they get sulfured, then she'd take them out and put them in fruit jars. I can about still almost taste them sulfured apples, they were good."

Families stored foods that had to be kept cold, like milk, in caves, springhouses, and root cellars. The oral histories chronicle dreadful journeys into dark caves and tales of unlucky girls falling into cold springs while fetching milk jugs.

Francis Davis, born in 1924 in Middle Island Creek, West Virginia, used to retrieve butter and preserved foods her grandmother stored in a hillside cave. "I was always afraid to go in that cave

Olive Jell-O, ***oil on panel by Lina Tharsing.***

cause I was afraid of snakes," she remembered. "After we washed our hands good, we'd have to go down there and take that rock off. And then take that board off there and reach down in that old cold brine and get a handful of pickled beans. Or if we was getting sauerkraut, we'd have to do the same thing. Oh, I hated that! Then we had to cover all that back up. Stick my hands down in that old sour brine. Muuuh! It was cold in the wintertime to do that."

Ice boxes set out on porches were an option for some rural families that lived close enough to a central icehouse. They set out signs directing drivers up their roads on weekly delivery routes.

With electricity came refrigerators. "When we first got electricity, the first thing my mother did was buy a refrigerator of course, and then she bought an electric stove," said Betty Bailey. "Had the house wired so that she could have those appliances. Well, in 1953, I was a sophomore in high school and she bought a Hot Point refrigerator. Would you believe that the Hot Point refrigerator is in my garage right now and still running and keeping ice, beverages cold for the kids? Sixty-some years later that refrigerator is still going."

Refrigeration changed household and farm labor. Women were no longer tied to wood stoves, canning massive quantities of produce. Now, they could cut corn and freeze it. Instead of cooking beans outside over an open fire for four hours, pressure canners could do it in thirty minutes on an electric stovetop. Community canneries and smokehouses faded from the rural landscape. Gelatin products like Sure-Jell sped up the process of preserving fruits.

Among those advances, Jell-O was special. Many of the women mentioned a "fancy Jell-O salad," reserved for holidays like Christmas, as a modern dish that became a family tradition.

My home's refrigerator runs off electricity from one of the earliest established co-ops in Appalachian Kentucky. And my family has a fancy red, white, and green Jell-O salad we make only at Christmas. It's a bit of an eyesore, but I love it. A scan of my local grocery store reveals ample shelf space dedicated to a carnival of neon Jell-Os. Dubious flavors like piña colada and Jolly Rancher Blue Raspberry are hard to reconcile with anything resembling a fruit found in nature. While I do believe in the magical and healing properties of Jell-O, it's really not about the taste or texture or colors, but the context in which it's consumed and the memories associated with it.

For the farm women of eastern Kentucky and West Virginia, Jell-O was a significant marker in their lives for the convenience, modernity, and the domestic labor changes it represented. And the memories of tastes that linger on their palates and minds? Those are reserved for the Southern mountain fruits of their childhood.

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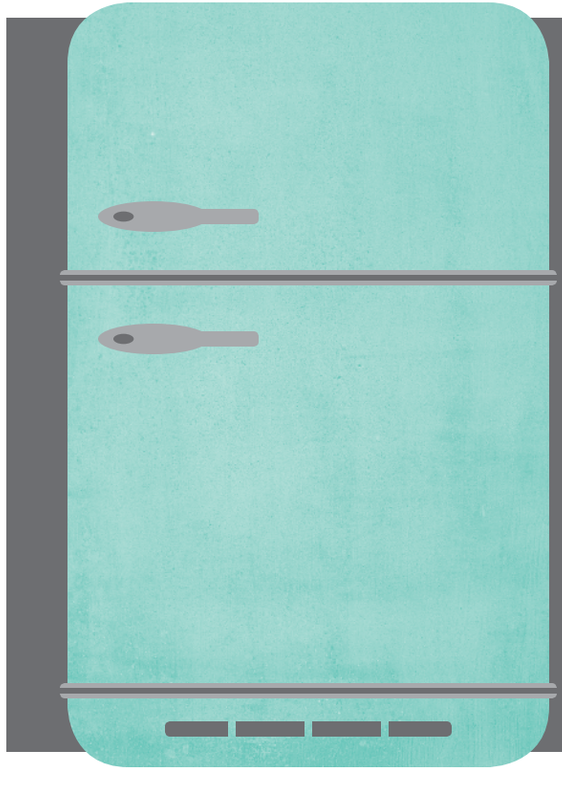
The oral histories in this article are used with permission from "Gathering the Stories of Appalachian Foodways: An Oral History Project," archived at Berea College in Hutchinson Library Special Collections. The oral histories were conducted by Berea students under the direction of Margaret Dotson as part of her Appalachian foodways course.



SOUTHERN BELLE SALAD

1 bottle Coca-Cola
2 Tbsp. lemon juice
1/2 cup chopped pecans
1 cup hot water
1 pkg. cherry Jell-O
1 can Bing cherries
1 3-oz. pkg. cream cheese

Pour hot water over gelatin. Add Coke and lemon juice. Cool. Add cherries, cheese broken into small chunks, and pecans. Pour into individual molds or 8-inch ring mold. Serve on a bed of lettuce with mayonnaise. Serves 8.

- Mary Frances Baals from *What's Cookin' Along the Big Sandy,* published by the Junior Women's League of Paintsville, Kentucky, in 1956.