

## **The Pioneers Were Eating "Green" and Didn't Know It**

By Missy Cox Jones

Yes, our early day pioneers and my parents and our family through the 1940's were eating very organic and didn't know it. I have thought a lot about the early day settlers, coming into new country. Most of them, going to new country would be planting gardens in new ground. Some of them brought garden seeds with them to plant in their new homes. But, remember, many early day settlements, even here in Comanche county, didn't have any stores for shopping at first.

My great grandfather, Andrew J. Cox, was the oldest of 10 children. He came with his parents in a wagon train from Newton County, Missouri to Dallas, Texas. They arrived in Dallas on March 10, 1845, and took up land with the Peters Colony, 640 acres, 1 section of land.

One daughter of that family, Elizabeth Cox, fell in love with a young man who rode horseback and traveled with the wagon train to Texas. He and several other young men would help to find the trail for the wagon train, to find water, and kill deer, antelope and wild turkeys for the people in the wagon train to eat. His name was Richard Bruton. After they reached Texas, Elizabeth Cox and Richard Bruton were married. From writings that he left, he told about their early married life. He said this was the spring of the year, in March, when they reached Dallas, and they didn't have a corn crop that first year. So, that meant that they didn't raise any corn to be ground into cornmeal for cornbread. He said they lived on fresh meat that he had killed, and on honey from bee trees that he had found. And, no corn bread or bread of any kind. Certainly not flour for biscuits, no place to buy flour. He wrote that they had never been happier than they were that first year.

But, the next year, they did plant a corn crop and were so proud of it. He built a corn crib to store the crop in. Now, they would have corn ground for cornmeal, and also corn would be used to feed their horses. He wrote that there was a prairie fire, and the corn crib and all of the crop of corn was lost in the fire.

Later, more settlers came in, someone set up a store, and if you had any money, you could buy meal and flour.

Just think of the early day settlers. Many of them were used to having big gardens back home. One thing they did find, in many places, was poke salad. I have read about the early day pioneers, who had no green garden in the fall and winter, and no stores to buy greens at, were so happy to find poke salad growing wild. They knew these greens were so healthy. They also knew how to cook dandelion greens, and several other kinds that would have been growing wild.

Early day settlers, in early writings, called poke, "poke salat". Wouldn't they be surprised if they could see the greens available in a store today, and to know that we can make a full meal, and add anything you want to, to a green salad?

My daddy loved poke salad and we all did. A big pot of "poke", cooked with some hog jowl in it, was so good, and with a big pan of corn bread, this is eating fit for a king. This was a plant with big green leaves. The new leaves were the best to eat, and in the early spring, Daddy would know where the plants were and he would go and pick some of the new, young leaves. Mama would pick over them, and pull out the spines, leaving just the tender parts of the leaf. Mama knew to parboil this for several times. She would cover the leaves with water in a big pot, bring it to a good boil, boil it for a little while, pour off that water, cover it again with water, and boil again. She did this for three or four times. Someone back in the early days learned how to do this, because it may be poison for people to eat unless you parboil it.

Gardens were not fertilized back then. I never knew or heard anything about buying fertilizer to put out. Our Daddy would take the chicken manure from the chicken pens, spread it out on the garden spot before he plowed up the site in the spring. We always had lots of Irish potatoes in the garden. Daddy would plant those potato eyes, and that soil was so fertile from the chicken manure, the leaves on the potato plants would be almost black.

I remember reading about the Pilgrims coming to America, and how the Indians showed them to put a fish in the hole where they would be planting a few grains of corn. This was fertilizer for the new corn plants, and the Indians knew how to do that.

When we cooked or canned, there was nothing adding to our jars except maybe salt and sugar. If you look at some cans or items in the grocery store today, they will have a long list of ingredients that you have no idea what they are. The early settlers did not add anything like this to their jars they were putting up, and neither do the people canning today.

I firmly believe that these early day foods were so healthy for people. Pictures from my family and other families in early days will show the family dressed up for the photograph. In my Daddy's family, there were 7 boys. They were all about 6 feet tall, good looking and very healthy. They were pioneers and worked hard and ate well, all fruits and vegetables that their family grew. They ate chickens and beef and hogs that their family raised, and sometimes deer, turkey or squirrels. They also ate fresh fish that they caught in the South Leon River. They all had big gardens and raised every kind of fruit that would grow here in central Texas.

I imagine that modern shoppers think that "organic" has just been invented. They may be surprised to know that it has been here all of the time. I know that people today are paying premium prices for items labeled "organic". Also, all of our chickens were free range, they ranged all over the yard, the gardens and the fields. Now, people want free range chicken and will pay high prices for healthier, better chickens to eat.