2012

Camp Kitchens

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol20/iss1/50

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My Barn
Abigail Swanson

As soon as the sun has brightened the sky enough to pick my way across the field, I find myself pausing at the unpainted side of my small barn. Three sides have been repainted in classic barn red, dull and utilitarian. The back is still painted the dusty straw yellow of my husband’s mistress’ hair. The wild grasses that butt against the barn are cut low and clean, the goats my daughter is raising for 4-H have been more useful that I could have imagined. The large front door slides open easily on the freshly sanded and greased track. The barn is brimming with life, the chickens cluck around my ankles as I feed them too much scratch, but who ever heard of spoiled chickens? One of the hinges on Daisy’s stall is loose; it wiggles as she brushes past it and lumbers out the door to the pasture. She’s walking slower these days, udder heavy and swinging, the calf will be here any day.

The barn cats, Smoke and Fire, call me over to admire their six kittens. Their eyes are just open, still milky and sticky, but they totter over to the edge of their straw nest to lick my fingertips. Five of the young ones are dark grey like their mother, but one female is orange like her father, and together they light up the dark corner of the barn. She’ll be a wild one too, but a great mouser. I tuck the escaping straw into the corner and fluff their nest a bit. While Smoke was giving birth Fire never left her side, licking her ears, nuzzling her head after each birth. He only left to kill a mouse which he presented to her after the sixth, the little wet bundle of orange fur who I think I’ll call Ember.

Climbing up the ladder to the hay loft I can hear the birds cooing in the rafters. The soft rustle is calming. The hay loft is nearly bare, only half a bale in the corner, but I sweep it again anyway in anticipation of my first harvest. The emptiness is no longer frightening, I know I will fill it, in a few days at the most, and we’ll make it through another winter.

Camp Kitchens
Jake Herold

If you have ever been in a camp kitchen, you know exactly what I’m talking about. If not, don’t miss out before you croak.

The outside always looks downright sketchy. A beat-up screen door seems almost ominous. The thin metal screen on all of them is bent in at least six inches, the stain is flaking off, and doorknobs are optional. They are all held back by springs, but the doors themselves are light, surprising you with a loud and fast explosion of noise when they close. You wince a little the first time you walk in every season, forgetting to put your foot back and catch the door. By the end of the season, you have it down by rote. They all squeak a little...

Once through the door, you notice that your feet aren’t quite even. Don’t sweat it, that’s just the missing tile and a half from the linoleum floor. As you cast your eyes upward, you notice the cook glance at you, and then busily return to what she was doing. It’s not because she’s mean, it’s because she’s busy. If you stop in and help though, she’ll be more than happy to chat with you. More than likely she’s chopping veggies. No one is quite sure where all the veggies come from, or where they go, but they are always being chopped.

To one side there will be a set of 8 burners for boiling water and the like. If there is someone in the kitchen, there is something on the stove. There is also a 2x6 flat top griddle: a little greasy, but otherwise well taken care of. There’s a small army of spices keeping lookout from the stove’s overhang. General Garlic commands his legion of aromatic companions. He’s the king, going in everything that isn’t a dessert. His foot soldiers of season salt and rosemary valiantly throw themselves into danger at the cook’s whim.

Right across from the stove is THE ISLAND. The Island is always the heart of the kitchen. It is where foot marks are worn in from the hours standing there dicing veggies. An iPod speaker with quirky music, turned down just low enough so that the diners don’t hear, is consistently nearby.

Hobart is always skulking about. A big steel block of a machine, constantly steaming... a friend and a nemesis. It’s great that he helps get the dishes done, but the frequent burns make you grum-
ble. There is always his sidekick above the elbow-deep vats of scalding water (also called "sinks" by people with a more colloquial lexicon). The high pressure hose blasts food from the plates. A great pair, but they always leave you with at least a few burns. There is always a waist-high metal table near Hobart, with at least one soiled mug or plate from snacking staffers. It can pile up to about two feet of solid dishes during meals and prep times.

At camp there are two kinds of warm chocolate drinks. There is hot cocoa and hot cocoa. Hot cocoa at camp is bland. Tending towards piss-water status, it does warm you up, but with a flavor that barely registers on the palate. This is the drink of choice for the campers, who somehow have been duped into believing that you only use one cocoa packet per cup. Bah! What folly! The staff always drinks Hot Cocoa. Deep, dark, and rich, this frothy brew warms the very marrow of your bones. After hours in the freezing rain, the Hershey god’s sweet nectar brings you back to the world of the warm. Just sitting in the warm kitchen around the island, drinking your cocoa is, perhaps, the best possible memory you can have at camp. The kitchen is the Ellis Island of the camp, accepting the cold, homeless, and soggy staff immigrants from times of work.

At my camp the pantry in the back is bear-scarred. With claw marks on our floor, and a beaten wall, we’re surprised that there hasn’t been a repeat incident. The bear climbed through the wall’s weak point, an old window frame that had been patched over, and began to gorge itself for the oncoming winter. Our chef walked in at 5:30 in the morning, wondering why her pantry was full of black fur. After getting over her flabbergastation, our chef fled to the head wrangler’s house. Wrangler Nick grabbed his gun, but by that point the bear had vamoosed, apparently more afraid of the Herold family than in love with food.

Finally…the smell! I absolutely adore the smell of camp kitchens. Part propane, after burn smell. Part baking bread, part pine, part garlic, part mysterious and rich musk, and part sweet. It smells like friendship, good conversations, late nights and early mornings. It smells downright warm and cozy...like a hug, it wraps you in its warm embrace. It smells like a thousand good memories. It smells like home.

If I Had to beCaught
Jeriann Watkins

It is a gorgeous day. I swim freely in my lovely, fast-paced stream, loving life. When I first left the cave-pond that had always been my home, I feared I would regret it, but my mind was made up; I needed change. So I left, and I absolutely love life in this action-packed river. And though I have been sheltered, I am not ignorant of the ways of this world. I know the dangers that lurk around every corner, waiting to catch me unawares.

So of course, your bait does not fool me. Yes, that plump worm is tempting, floating there, just begging to be snatched up, but I know that hiding beneath that fleshy mass is a wiry hook—a hook that has caught many fish already, and will catch many more. I refuse to be one of those fish.

Still, the concept is interesting. Can so many fish be that dumb, that unobservant, that reckless—to fall for such a blatant trap? Honestly, to be that oblivious, not to take two seconds to see the slight bit of metal, the line of wire extending from the worm—who is in an extremely odd pose if you stop to think about it—not to notice all these signs is inexcusable.

Could it be that these fish, your previous dinners, were driven by starvation? No, not in this stream. Perhaps they saw all the signs, but there was something else, some reason, another factor that made it worth the risk.

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Now I am curious. I swim about, observing the worm, the hook, the line. I know you see me; you are willing me to bite. I stare back at you. I am smarter than those other fish.

Suddenly, there is a change. Something is moving around me. The worm is being dragged out of the water. That poor annelid must have horrid vertigo by now. You pull in your line, set the pole against a rock, and kneel down right at the water’s edge. I see your fingers brush the water causing ripples to spread across the surface. How warm your fingers must be.