The Black Heart of the Kitchen

By Eric Francis

When I left home after college, I took with me my mother's love and her cast iron skillet.

Unpretentious, utilitarian, and a lustrous black that comes from decades of proper seasoning, it was a staple of her kitchen and has become the bedrock of mine. There's almost nothing I won't cook within its 10-inch span (though for big crowds, I'll haul out its 14-inch big brother I got a few years back), and there's no cooking surface that is beyond it: the stovetop, the oven, the grill, an open fire.

While Arkansas's native peoples managed for untold millennia without cast iron cookware, I'll wager that ironmongery has been used to whip up vittles in Arkansas ever since the first settlers crossed the Big Muddy and followed our namesake river or some other waterway up into the state's interior. Tough and versatile, it is exactly what you needed to survive on the frontier.

As a matter of fact, the cast iron Dutch oven is even the state's historic cooking vessel. One of the people behind that designation is John G. Ragsdale, Jr., a former El Doradoan now living in Texas, who back in the 1970s published *Dutch Oven Cooking*, now in its fourth edition with more than 350,000 copies sold. But Ragsdale wasn't a chef looking to gain fame and glory; rather, he was an oilman trying to ensure he got a good meal on certain weekends.

"Back about 50 years ago, I inherited a Boy Scout troop and the boys had not been trained well in cooking," said Ragsdale, who spent his career as an engineer with Lion Oil and as a private consultant. "A couple of us decided to start on an adventure to instruct them in cooking."

John G. and De De Ragsdale at a Dutch Oven Cooking demonstration, Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, 1988. Courtesy: John G. and De De Ragsdale Papers (MC 1459), Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries.

The cooking vessel of choice was the cast iron Dutch oven—wide, tall-sided, three-legged, with a lid sporting a tall lip to hold coals on top. He selected it because it had an advantage over all the other campfire kitchen standards.

"You can bake in them," Ragsdale explained. "You can cook in skillets, and we've cooked in gallon tin cans on canoe trips when we were in one canoe and didn't want to carry a lot of equipment. But Dutch ovens were something we could bake in—biscuits, cakes, cookies, cobblers, whatever you wanted to adapt them to."

So month after month, Ragsdale invented the recipes that his Scouts would use on their campouts. He didn't have any prior experience to speak of, so there was a lot of experimentation.

"Sometimes in our troop, if we had four or five patrols we'd give each other the same recipe and see how it turned out," he said, "or give each one different recipes and they would compare them among themselves."

Eventually he decided to put together a list of the recipes and some instructions for using the Dutch oven into a book. *Dutch Oven Cooking* premiered in 1973 and marked its 40th anniversary this year. He followed it up in 2004 with *Dutch Ovens Chronicled: Their Use in the United States*.

It has been a couple of years since Ragsdale has exercised his own Dutch oven skills. He keeps a few around, although most of what he collected over the years—dozens and dozens, dating back as far as about 1790—were donated to the Historic Arkansas Museum in Little Rock and the Plantation Agriculture Museum in Scott. Although he does not have

a favorite recipe, he can tell you what he's cooked more of in a Dutch oven than anything else: biscuits, especially when he was feeding crowds of visitors at the Ozark Folk Center or other museums.

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"We would have a Dutch oven heated and I could usually, in a 12-inch oven, get 22 to 24 biscuits," Ragsdale said. "I have a small biscuit cutter, and a philosophy for that, too: If you cut them smaller, you can give samples to more people. Often it was never enough."

Many of those biscuits were consumed by visitors to the Historic Arkansas Museum, whose deputy director Swannee Bennett says their collection of cast iron cookware is unrivaled in the state. But none of it was produced here; Arkansas didn't have a foundry turning out skillets and such, but the state's mercantile outfits were eager to fill the void for what was known as "castings" and sold by the pound, he said.

"Go to the University of Arkansas Special Collections and get into the microfilm of old newspapers and you'll see 'just received 1,200 pounds of castings' or '5,000 pounds of castings'—that meant cast iron ware," said Bennett. "The names we use today are not the names they used then."

For example, the term Dutch oven didn't come into use until the late nineteenth century, but you could buy a spider (a skillet with legs) along with saucepans, kettles, pots, and the like.

I asked Bennett if the museum had ever knocked the dust off a piece of its old iron cookery, re-seasoned it, and put it to the use for which it was intended. Maybe it was my imagination, but it almost sounded like he was frowning when he responded, "We buy reproductions to use for our demonstrations."

Perhaps I was taking the term "living history" a little too seriously. But that's beside the point.

Cast iron wasn't just limited to cookware, of course. The Rogers Historical Museum has all manner of cast ironmongery from the state's history back to the late 1800s.

"We do have several pieces: a laundry boiler, a lard press, pots and pans, a griddle, an egg beater, Dutch ovens," said Jami Roskamp, the museum's curator of collections. "We have a pressure cooker from the 1920s to '30s."

The beauty of cast iron, Roskamp pointed out, was that it was fairly easy to make something with it—just pour molten iron into a mold—and the resultant object stored and released heat in a consistent manner, a boon to cooking without thermostats. Then there was cast iron's parlor trick: seasoning.

"To make a skillet non-stick, you had to season it so when you cooked, your food wasn't going to stick to your pan," said Roskamp.

Okay… but has she tried it with anything in the museum's collection? The answer, delivered with a disbelieving laugh, is no.

"You could," she said cautiously, as though not wanting to give anybody ideas. "I would definitely want to thoroughly clean it and season it again. But there are people today who still collect antique cast iron skillets and things because they believe they are far superior to what is produced today."

The advent of the thermostatically controlled electric oven in the 1850s was the writing on the wall for the Dutch oven, Ragsdale said, but other cast iron cookware has retained its place in our kitchens. And while you can get yours ready-seasoned from the factory or coated with slick, colorful enamel, odds are someone in your family still has the old standby sitting out there on the stove: a heavy black skillet, old as the hills, ready to take on all comers.

Eric Francis is an award winning journalist and editor with over 20 years of experience in Arkansas.