



Aunt Mag's Recipe Book

Heritage Cooking *from a*
Carolina Kitchen



Carolyn Rawls Booth

author of Between the Rivers



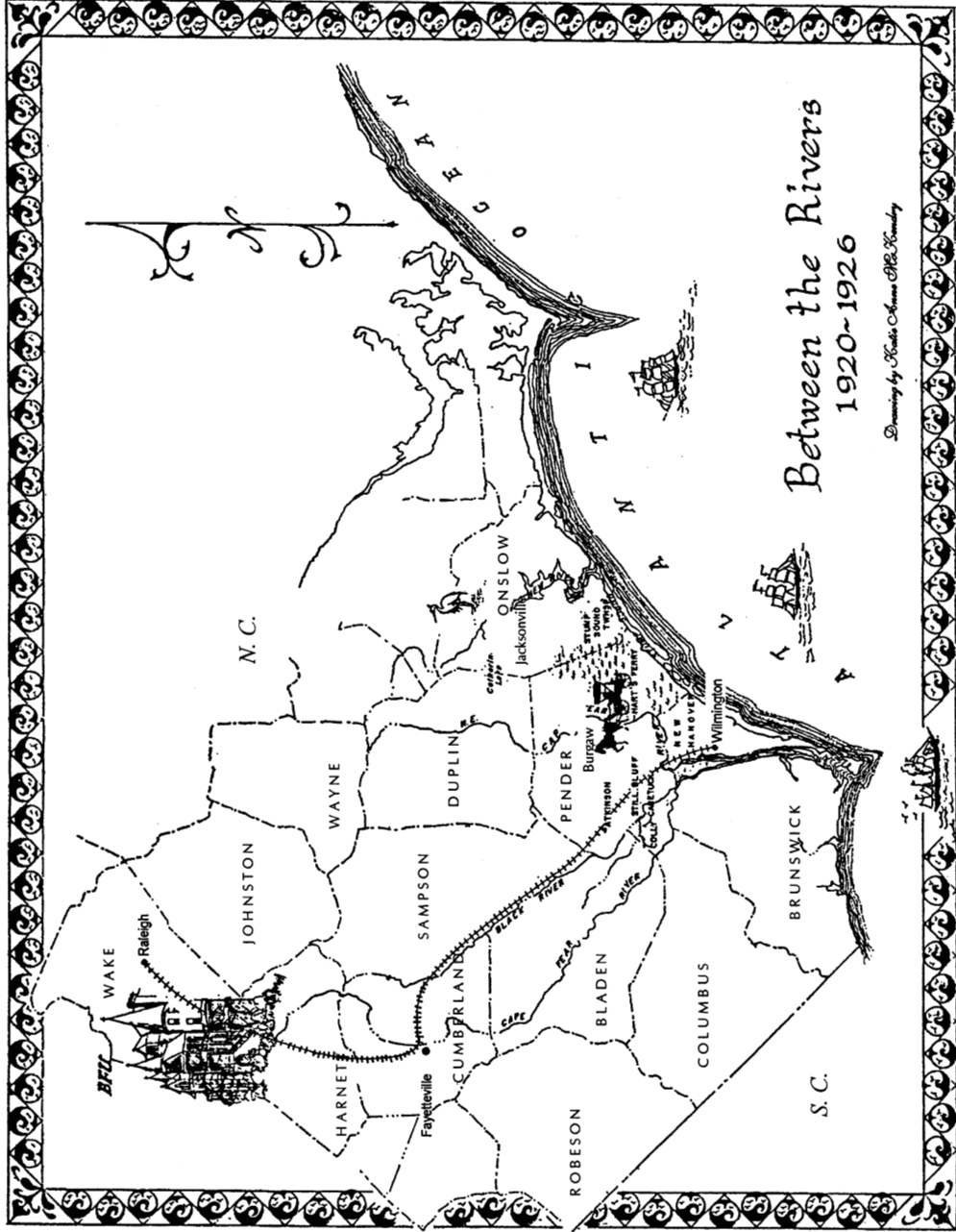
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Between the Rivers 1920-1926

Drawing by Kate Colman O'Rourke

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with original illustrations by the author

Carolyn Rawls Booth
author of *Between the Rivers*



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Heritage Cooking from a Carolina Kitchen***

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Between the Rivers

Coastal Carolina Press, 2001

A Word to Readers

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO my Scots-Irish ancestors who found their way to coastal North Carolina, settling on the land between the rivers in Bladen, Pender, New Hanover, and Onslow Counties. I attribute my rich food heritage to them and especially to all the Aunt Mags—the mothers, wives, and daughters who instilled in me a love of food and the wisdom to hold onto my culinary heritage. What greater resource do we have in our lives than the lure of the palate, to bring our families together?

Many of you will remember Aunt Mag, whose legend as a good cook I established in my novel *Between the Rivers* and whose story, like that of the book's other characters, is drawn from real life. This sampler cookbook is a spinoff of the novel, part of a larger cookbook which at this time is in the production stages.



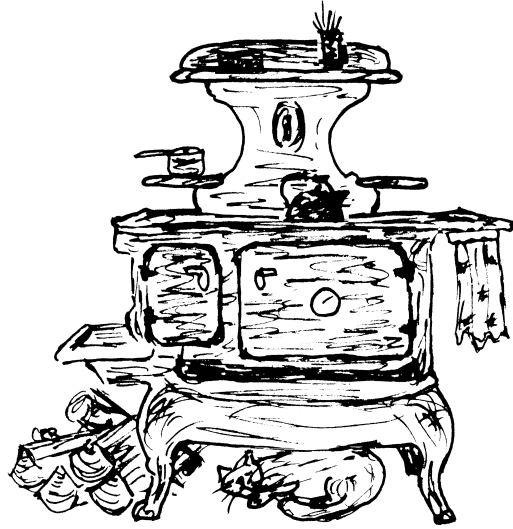
Included here are heritage recipes gleaned from centuries of traditions in food between the rivers, traditions that have passed from generation to generation of good Southern cooks. Like all good family cooks, Aunt Mag was revered for her ability to take whatever was on hand and make savory, satisfying dishes to feed a family or a large gathering. Ingredients were simple and plentiful on a farm: meat and meat byproducts; poultry; vegetables and fruits; flour, sugar, and salt. Kitchen equipment was even more basic, with eggbeaters and wooden spoons for beating, a small paring knife for peeling, and a large butcher knife for slicing anything from cake to country ham.

Preparing food on a wood stove was no easy chore, but with a box of kindling and a good supply of oak firewood right beside the stove, Aunt Mag could stoke up the fire each morning and maintain a hot oven until well after supper.

Her food was simple but tasty—something I've tried to stay true to in this recipe book. But you'll see that I've adjusted the recipes to conform to today's standards of healthier eating, and to the time-saving equipment found in most kitchens in the twenty-first century.

You will see, too, that like any cook I prefer certain brands; where I feel that they make a difference, I have specified them as such. My dry measurements are level, and my liquids are as accurate as the line on a glass measuring cup. I believe in good equipment: a heavy-duty mixer, a food processor, an accurate oven, and the best pots and pans I can buy. Like Aunt Mag did, I use real butter, whole milk, eggs, and cream. If you substitute my ingredients or take shortcuts on my methods, your dishes will not taste like mine—but they may be just as good. Enjoy!

CAROLYN RAWLS BOOTH



Aunt Mag's wood stove

Aunt Mag's Cooking

AUNT MAG WAS A GOOD COOK, the kind of good cook who never lacked the imagination and know-how to put a meal on the table three times a day, seven days a week. When provisions were scarce, they say she could make gravy out of squirrel's tracks. Now *that's* a good cook.

A widowed lady, Aunt Mag lived with my grandmother's family, who willingly turned over their farm kitchen to the matriarch, giving her full control (something Aunt Mag tended to take on her own anyhow). She was the first to rise every morning, appearing in the kitchen fully dressed in a simple black frock over which she wore a white starched apron. She'd stoke up the fire in the wood stove and put on a kettle of water, and before the rooster crowed she'd have a pan of biscuits in the oven.

Aunt Mag didn't tote firewood, but she could kill a chicken in a heartbeat and serve it up for supper in ten different ways. She didn't work in the fields, but her garden was her pride and joy with its neat rows of okra, beans, tomatoes, and onions just a step away from the kitchen door. Her chicken coop was sturdier than some houses in the neighborhood, and her laying hens well fed and prized for their bountiful production of eggs. Aunt Mag seldom saw the inside of a general store. She had no need. She simply cooked what was in her garden or what Grandpa brought her from the fields or the smokehouse.

On Wednesday evenings Aunt Mag would pile into the car to go to prayer meeting with the rest of the family, carrying a platter of fried chicken, a side dish of whatever vegetable she had on hand, and a pound cake. Aunt Mag



*Aunt Mag in her
Sunday best,
about 1900*

attended church on Sunday too, after starting her dinner and leaving it to slow-cook on the back of the stove. She'd likely set the table before she left with a vase of flowers and a fresh cloth, in case the preacher or some of the Wilmington crowd decided to come to Sunday dinner.

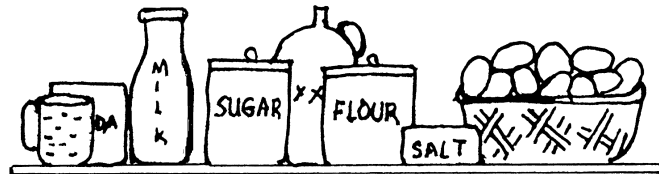
Aunt Mag never lacked for something to cook even in the winter when her garden was reduced to a row of collards and a small patch of turnip salad. When the fresh meat from a hog killing ran out, there'd be sausage and smoked ham. Nearby, sweet potatoes basked in the warmth of a haystack; and in the pantry there were jars of lye-soaked big hominy (we children called them horses' teeth) tomatoes, corn, butterbeans, and field peas that she'd put up in the summer when there were more vegetables than the family or the hogs could eat. Cold weather also meant time for hunting, the men bringing home venison and squirrel to stew and smother in gravy. When spring was in the air again, there'd be fish to catch on a pretty day.

When Aunt Mag died, nobody knew how to cook like her. They'd never had to. After the condolence gifts of food stopped coming in from all the neighbors, table food was mighty scarce. My grandmother and her sisters attempted to run the kitchen with some instruction from my great-grandmother, who was laid up in bed by then with a dropped womb (she'd had thirteen children). The situation was desperate for a while, but in time the girls learned to cook following a treasure they found among Aunt Mag's things. In the kitchen cupboard drawer, they'd discovered her recipe book, written in a careful hand, diligently describing her methods for making cakes and stewing meats, her way of seasoning, her lists of foods for various gatherings.

The recipe book was simply bound in brown paper, sewn together with kitchen twine. In later years my grandmother transcribed the penciled copy on her typewriter to try and preserve the book for future generations. When it was passed down to me, I took it a step further and converted the methods and measurements. Here then, is my gift to you and my family, a treasure of heirloom recipes from Aunt Mag's country kitchen. 🍷

Recipes

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Some Basic Ingredients in the Recipes

Flour is all-purpose or plain, unless otherwise stated. Find a flour that you like and stick with it. For the most part, I use Pillsbury, unbleached, all-purpose flour. I do not sift before measuring, but I pile the flour in the cup very gently and level it by slicing off the overflow with a knife. Self-rising flour has salt, baking powder, and sometimes soda in it—a convenience, that's all. Not all brands are the same. I like Red Band, mostly because my mother always used it.

Cornmeal, for the most part, is plain white or yellow water-ground style. Stone ground cornmeal is much coarser and does not lend itself to well to this region's traditional breads.

Shortening is a solid vegetable shortening, such as Crisco, packed into a metal measuring cup and leveled with a knife.

Granulated sugar is measured in a metal measuring cup and level. **Brown sugar** is packed into a metal measuring cup and leveled.

All liquids are measured in a glass measuring cup read at eye level. Most are at room temperature, unless otherwise specified.

Milk is whole or 2 percent fat unless otherwise specified.

Eggs are Grade A large or extra large.

Nonstick cooking sprays are wonderful, in my opinion. I never butter or grease a pan any other way. An added measure to prevent a cake from sticking to the pan is to cut a piece of waxed paper to fit the greased pan. Insert and smooth over the bottom of the pan.

Low-sodium broth: I prefer to salt my dishes according to taste, so I use low-sodium products whenever possible. Beef, chicken and vegetable broth intensify flavor and reduce the need for salt and fat by doing so.

Most of my recipes call for Miracle Whip **salad dressing** because it is a tradition in my family. You may substitute **mayonnaise**, but your end product will not taste the same.

Seasoned salts add a great deal of flavor and color to meats, fish, and poultry that are grilled or fried. I particularly like Lawry's and use it except where otherwise specified.

Meats, Poultry, & Seafood

AUNT MAG'S RECIPES WERE MORE about the way to cook the meats available to her, which were mostly chicken and pork. She said you could stew it, fry it, boil or bake it—no fancy names like *fricassee* or *tetrazzini*. Aunt Mag seasoned her meat with salt and pepper, and coated it with flour if it was to be fried. She made gravy by adding water or milk to the pan. If she had a tough old hen or a cut of meat that called for boiling, she seasoned it with onions and other savory root vegetables, covered it with water, and stewed it in a big pot on top of the stove. Baking or roasting simply called for longer cooking in the slow wood-stove oven.

The only cow at the old homeplace where Aunt Mag lived and cooked was a milk cow, but she could make a beef stew as good as anybody. If a neighbor killed a beef cow and sold it around the neighborhood, it was a welcome change from the regular offerings of squirrel, rabbit, and venison—but she said they all cooked up about the same in a stew. A cow was valued for her milk, whereas pigs and chickens had a shorter breeding time, making them readily available throughout the year. Of course chickens brought the added benefits of their eggs, which mightily improved the texture and tenderness of Aunt Mag's cakes and puddings.

What was really a welcome sight was some kin from down on the coast coming to visit loaded down with a bushel of oysters or an ice chest full of shrimp. Between the rivers this occurred quite often, with the coast only twenty to thirty miles away. The oysters were eaten raw, steamed, or stewed in milk, the shrimp simply boiled and put out on brown paper to peel and eat.



Beef Stew

SERVES ABOUT 6

You could substitute rabbit, squirrel, or venison for the beef in this stew, but the likelihood of having wild game in this day and time is as rare as having beef in Aunt Mag's time. Stew made a satisfying dish to take to church suppers, or maybe to the family of a loved one recently deceased. The gravy was mighty good sopped up with biscuits.



1 large onion, chopped
2 large cloves garlic, chopped
2 tablespoons olive oil

In a large deep pot or Dutch oven, over medium heat, brown the onion well in the olive oil, adding the garlic only for the last few minutes (garlic becomes bitter if it's browned). Set aside in a bowl.

2½ lbs. lean beef chuck, cut into 1½" cubes
½ cup all-purpose flour
Salt and pepper

2 tablespoons butter, or bacon drippings

Preheat oven to 350°F. Spread the beef cubes out on a piece of waxed paper. Generously salt and pepper and dust with flour. Add the butter or bacon drippings to the pot, turning heat up to medium high. Brown the meat on all sides.

Add:

1½ cups water
1 cup canned beef broth
1 cup red wine

Stir, loosening the browned flour from the bottom of the pot. Cover and place in oven for about one hour, more or less, depending upon the tenderness of the meat. Serve with mashed potatoes or wide noodles.

Chicken 'n' Pastry

MAKES ENOUGH FOR 8–10

- 1 roasting chicken (hen), or 4 extra large chicken breasts (not boneless)**
- 2 stalks of celery, cut in pieces**
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut in pieces**
- 1 large onion, quartered**
- 4 or 5 sprigs of parsley**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- Black pepper, freshly ground**
- 2 hard-boiled eggs, sliced**

Wash the hen under cold running water, removing any giblets or strange-looking things inside. Place in a large deep pot. Add enough water to almost cover. Add the celery, onion, carrots, parsley, and salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer about an hour or until the chicken pulls easily from the bones.

Carefully lift chicken out of the pot and place on a platter to cool. It will fall apart, but that's the idea. Strain the vegetables out of the broth using a slotted spoon. Discard. You may do this well ahead, or even the day before, so that the chicken cools enough to handle. Refrigerate broth and chicken separately.

Between the rivers, we call this chicken 'n' pastry, but it's also known in other areas as "chicken and dumplings," or "chicken and slick." Aunt Mag would have used a tough old laying hen past her prime, Grandpa having chased it around the coop a couple of times before he . . . well, you know.



Chicken 'n' Pastry,
cont.

*Always use all-
purpose flour for
rolling out pastries.
The leavening agents
in self-rising flour
may impart a bitter
taste to your pastry.*



Chicken 'n' Pastry

Pastry:

2 cups self-rising flour

¼ cup cold butter

1 cup broth

1 cup, more or less, of all-purpose flour

In a medium bowl, cut butter into flour using a pastry blender. Stir broth into flour and mix with a wooden spoon until blended. Place about 1 cup of all-purpose flour on a board or pastry cloth. Dump out the dough onto the flour and knead, incorporating more all-purpose flour if needed to make a smooth dough.

Roll dough out to ¼" thickness. Cut into 1" wide strips of pastry. You may do this ahead and allow the dough to dry while you prepare the broth.

Bring strained broth to a rolling boil. Drop strips of pastry into broth, gently poking pastry under until it is covered in broth. Reduce heat to low and cook covered about 10 minutes. If the broth does not thicken to your liking, stir a couple of tablespoons of flour into a half cup of cold water until blended. Pour slowly into the hot broth. Cook a few more minutes until thickened.

Add the chicken pieces and sliced boiled eggs. Stir lightly. Let the chicken and pastry stand covered until serving time.

Fried Chicken & Gravy

SERVINGS: ALLOW 1–2 PIECES OF CHICKEN
PER PERSON

Split chicken breasts (bone-in)
Lawry's Seasoned Salt
Ground black pepper
Crisco solid shortening
1 cup canned low-sodium chicken broth
Flour for dredging

Day before:

Wash chicken pieces thoroughly. With a good pair of kitchen shears, trim away excess fat and skin. Cut the rib portions away from the meaty parts of the breast. Discard or use in making stock. With the scissors, cut through the breast meat and breastbone across the center of the breast, dividing each breast into 2 parts.

Rinse the chicken again, drain and place in a sealable plastic bag and refrigerate until ready to cook.

Up to 3 hours before serving:

Spread the chicken pieces out on a large piece of waxed paper. Sprinkle both sides of the chicken generously with Lawry's seasoned salt and ground black pepper. In a large plastic bag, place about a cup of flour, ½ teaspoon of seasoned salt, and a little ground black pepper. Shake to mix. Drop in 2



Aunt Mag would have used one of her large black iron skillets, but an electric skillet does almost as well. We also use all breast since it's available to us. (A well-seasoned iron skillet is worth its weight in gold, but new, pre-seasoned iron skillets are available in stores these days.)

Washing and draining the chicken pieces the day before allows the juices to coagulate, helping the flour to stick better to the chicken in the breading process. One of Aunt Mag's little tricks.

Fried Chicken, cont.

or 3 pieces of chicken. Zip up the bag and shake to coat the chicken with flour mixture. Remove the floured pieces to a large plate while heating shortening.

Heat at least one cup of Crisco solid shortening, preferably in a seasoned iron skillet, on medium-high. If you are using an electric skillet, set the temperature on high. Heat shortening until a piece of chicken sizzles when you place it in the pan. Either way, watch carefully and turn to brown fairly quickly on both sides.

Browning slowly towards the last produces the succulent brown crust Aunt Mag was known for.

Reduce the heat and cover with a loose-fitting lid for about 5 minutes. Remove the lid and turn each piece of chicken. Reducing heat as necessary, continue cooking without the lid, turning often, browning slowly on all the edges by standing pieces on end or on their sides in the pan. This takes about 30 minutes, or longer if you do it very slowly towards the last. Watch carefully and remove the smaller, less meaty pieces when they have reached a rich brown color on all sides.



Gravy Boat

Drain chicken pieces on paper towels before placing chicken on a platter. Cover lightly with tinfoil until serving time.

Chicken Gravy:

After you have removed the chicken, drain off most of the fat, leaving the brown bits in the pan. Add to

the skillet 2 to 3 tablespoons of the seasoned flour that you used to coat the chicken pieces. Brown the flour slowly, scraping up the browned bits, until it is a golden brown. Add 1 cup of canned low-sodium chicken broth. Have another cup reserved to add as you thin the gravy to a consistency to your liking. Serve with rice or mashed potatoes.

Aunt Mag had no need for canned chicken broth—she almost always had a pot of rich broth simmering on the stove.

Chicken Salad

MAKES 6–8 SERVINGS

4–6 large chicken breasts (bone-in)

Water for cooking

1 small onion, cut in pieces

1 small carrot, cut in pieces

Several sprigs of parsley

1 teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon ground pepper

Juice of one whole lemon

4 large stalks of celery, diced

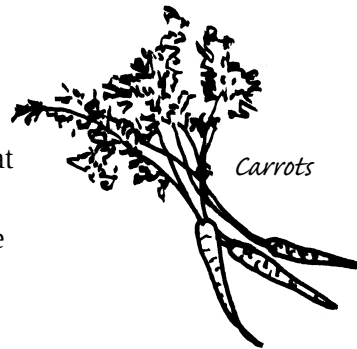
1 cup Miracle Whip salad dressing

Place the chicken in a pot and add enough water to barely cover the chicken. Add the onion, carrot, parsley, salt, and pepper. Bring to a boil; reduce heat and cook 30 minutes. Allow the chicken to cool in the broth. When cool enough to handle, remove the chicken from the bones and discard the bones. Reserve broth for another use.



Parsley

You'd find chicken salad at most of Aunt Mag's gatherings year-round. She didn't like a lot of pickles and such—just crisp green celery. Her secret was the lemon, which made the dressing go a lot farther.



Carrots

Chicken Salad, cont. Cut chicken in ½" pieces with kitchen shears. Sprinkle generously with salt and pepper, or to taste. Cut the lemon in half and squeeze the juice over the chicken pieces. Toss gently to mix. Refrigerate. This can be done a day ahead.

Cold chicken tosses more easily and keeps its shape in cubes. *Early on the day of serving:* Add diced celery and Miracle Whip to the chicken, tossing gently. It may be necessary to add more salad dressing. Adjust seasonings and refrigerate until serving time.

Chicken 'n' Rice Soup

6-8 SERVINGS

Aunt Mag made this soup almost every day. A comforting soup and a wonderful healer, a jar of it was the main item in her "Sick Basket." For the very frail, she'd make the soup thin with only a little rice for strengthening.

**4 large chicken breast pieces (bone-in),
or 1 small whole chicken**
2 quarts of water
**1 large carrot, onion and piece of celery,
cut in pieces**
Several sprigs of parsley
2 teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

Place the chicken in a medium-sized stock pot. Add the remaining ingredients and bring to a rolling boil. Reduce heat and simmer for about 40-45 minutes or until tender.

Remove chicken from broth. When it cools enough