

Annie D. Tallent

Bill of Fare on the Plains

At the other end of the spectrum from the Gilded Age trappings of Delmonico's was the hard life of the trail during the country's westward expansion. Annie D. Tallent (1827–1901), born in York, New York, traveled with the Gordon Expedition from Sioux City, Iowa, into the Black Hills of Dakota Territory after gold was discovered in 1874. After her days panning for gold, she became superintendent of schools in Pennington County, South Dakota.



Perhaps some of my readers may like to know how we fared during our long journey over the plains. Well, until the settlements were left behind, we lived on the fat of the land through which we passed, being able to procure from the settlers along the route many articles which we were after compelled to do entirely without.

From that time to the end of our journey, or rather until we returned to civilization, the luxuries of milk, eggs, vegetables, etc., could not, of course, be had for love or money.

Our daily "bill of fare," which, in the absence of menu cards, was stereotyped on memory's tablets, consisted of the following articles, to wit: For breakfast, hot biscuit, fried bacon, and black coffee; for dinner, cold biscuit, cold baked beans, and black coffee; for supper, black coffee, hot biscuit, and baked beans warmed over. Occasionally, in lieu of hot biscuits, and for the sake of variety, we would have what is termed in camp parlance, flapjacks. The men did the cooking for the most part, I, the while, seated on a log or an inverted water bucket, watching the process through the smoke of the camp fire, which, for some unexplainable reason, never ceased for a moment to blow directly in my face, shift as I might from point to point of the compass. I now recall how greatly I was impressed with the dexterity and skill with which they flopped over the flapjacks in the frying-pan. By some trick of legerdemain, they would toss up the cake in the air, a short distance, where

it would turn a partial somersault, then unfailingly return to the pan the other side up. After studying the *modus operandi*, for some time one day, I asked permission to try my skill, which was readily granted by the cook, who doubtless anticipated a failure. I tossed up the cake as I had seen them do, but much to my chagrin, the downcoming was wide of the mark. The cake started from the pan all right, but instead of keeping the perpendicular, as by the laws of gravitation it should have done, it flew off, at a tangent, in a most tantalizing manner, and fell to the ground several feet away from the pan, much to the amusement of the boys. I came to the conclusion that tossing pancakes was not my forte.

To relieve the monotony of our daily fare, our tables (?) were quite frequently provided with game of various kinds, such as elk, deer, antelope, grouse, etc., large bands of antelope being seen almost daily along the route over the plains. Each outfit had their own hunters, who supplied, for the most part, their respective messes, with game, but Capt. Tom Russell, who was the real "Nimrod" of the party, and a crack shot, bagged much more game than he needed, which surplus was distributed among the camps. Besides being a good hunter and skillful marksman, Capt. Tom Russell ever proved himself a brave and chivalrous gentleman, during the long, trying journey, and somehow I always felt safer when he was near.

There were several others in the party, too, who won the reputation of being skilled hunters, and judging by the marvelous stories told of the great number of deer, elk, and other animals killed, which could not be brought into camp, they deserved to stand at the head of the profession. If there is anything in the wide world, more than another, of which the average man feels proud, it is of the quantity of game he captures.

Speaking of game brings to mind an experience, the very remembrance of which always causes an uprising and revolution in the region of the principal organ of digestion. Some of the boys, in their very commendable desire to provide the camp with game, one day captured an immense elk, bringing in the choicest parts for distribution among the different messes, and judging from the flavor and texture of the flesh of the animal it must have been a denizen of the Hills since the time of the great upheaval, and to make a bad

matter worse, our chef for the day conceived the very reprehensible idea of cooking the meat by a process called “smothering.”

Having a deep-seated, dyed-in-the-wool antipathy to smothered meats of all kinds, I employed all the force of my native eloquence in trying to persuade him to adopt some more civilized method of cooking, but no, he was determined to smother it or not cook it at all, as by that process, he said, all the flavor of the meat would be retained, and he continued: “If my way doesn’t suit you, cook it yourself.” Accordingly it was cooked his way and brought to the table—the word table is here used figuratively—and truth compels me to admit that it looked very tempting, so, as I was abnormally hungry that night, I conveyed to my mouth, with a zeal and alacrity worthy of a better cause, an exceedingly generous morsel of the meat; but, oh, ye shades of my ancestors! it was speedily ejected and then and there I pronounced it the most villainous morsel I had ever tasted in all my checkered career, and the cook was compelled to concur in that opinion. “Ugh!” although more than two decades have passed since then, I can taste it yet. The trouble, however, was more in the elk than in the cooking.

All formality was thrown to the winds at meal time, each one helping himself or herself with a liberality and abandon, that was truly astonishing and, I might add, alarming, in view of the fact that our larders were becoming rapidly depleted, and that we were completely cut off from our base of supplies. Our coffee was drank from tin cups and our bacon and beans eaten from tin plates. Yes, we had knives and forks—not silver, nor even silver-plated, yet we enjoyed our meals, for with appetites whetted with much exercise and fresh air we were always ravenously hungry, and could eat bacon and beans with the keenest relish.

Strange as it now seems, while journeying over the plains I was for the most time blessed, or cursed, with a voracious, almost insatiable appetite—in fact, was always hungry during my waking hours, and what is most remarkable, none of the others were afflicted with the malady.

At the outset of the journey I had protested strongly against the kind of food on which we were being regaled, declaring that I never could be tempted to each such abominable stuff, and prophesying my own demise

from starvation within a month. Later, however, as I trudged along on foot in the rear of the wagon, I would often, between meals, stealthily approach the wagon, surreptitiously raise the lid of the “grub” box and abstract therefrom a great slice of cold bacon and a huge flapjack as large around as the periphery of a man’s hat—and a sombrero hat, at that—and devour them without ever flinching or exhibiting the slightest disgust.