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## A Cakewalk Through History: The Evolution of Cake and its Identity in America

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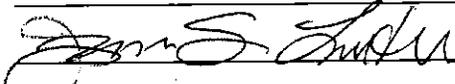
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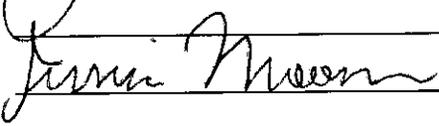
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Thesis title A Cakewalk Through History:  
The Evolution of Cake and its Identity in America

Intended date of commencement May 12, 2018

Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s)  5/11/18  
Date

Reader(s)  05/10/18  
Date

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**A Cakewalk Through History:  
The Evolution of Cake and its Identity in America**

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Rachel Claire Overby

May 9, 2018

There is truly nothing quite like a delectable slice of cake. No matter the occasion, the place, or the time of year, cake has withstood the test of time as one of the world's most beloved desserts. Coming in every shape, size, color, and flavor, cake has developed into an immensely varied dessert. Cake's identity in America is surprisingly complex. The conception of cake as a fluffy, three-layered, treat that has been around forever has actually undergone many changes over the centuries to reach that point. It even acts as a representation of historical backdrops, cultural perceptions, and technological breakthroughs. While the classic cakes such as the pound cake have been around for hundreds of years, the modern era of cooking has gifted the world with unique innovations in cake that are continuously breaking traditional boundaries. This research of the world of cake will explore how cake has adapted over the years in response to available resources, cultural and historical changes, and baking innovations, and how its continuously increasing accessibility has affected its identity as a cherished delicacy.

## **COLONIAL**

The United States of America is an intensely diverse country with historical roots lying all over the globe. As America struggled to establish its own identity, so too did its desserts. The progression of American identity can be seen through the cakes that the early settlers brought with them and the adaptation they underwent. Colonial America was a middle ground. Its settlers were primarily British, French, Dutch, and Spanish, yet these settlers had to begin forming a new identity when they settled in the colonies. Their new environment called for many adaptations to a new way of life. One of the most important and most difficult adaptations was to the new food environment. Differences in climates, native plants and ingredients, available technologies, and economic situations

all played a large role in what foods could be created by the settlers. While some of their cultural recipes could be recreated, others had to be significantly adapted in order to work in the new environment. This, along with the influence and knowledge gained from Native Americans and interactions with other settlers started to create the hybrid food culture that is typical of America. Desserts did not escape this hybridization, cake included (Byrn, 2016; Olver 2015).

Potatoes brought with Scotch-Irish to New Hampshire were the base for many of the precursors to modern cakes. A variety of fruit trees brought from England and apple trees brought from Holland helped bring fruit's sweetness to cakes. Nutmeg, an essential ingredient for spice cakes, was brought to Connecticut by the early settlers and became so ubiquitous with Connecticut that it is now "the nutmeg state." These ingredients combined with Native American ingredients such as "Indian maize" (as seen in several cookbooks and journals from this era) helped to create desserts unique to early America (Olver, 2015).

Many of our most beloved American desserts are actually of European origin. Pound cake, a cake that is so closely linked to Southern America, was actually a British creation brought over with the colonists. Sponge cake had been developed centuries earlier in France. Gingerbread can be seen in records from the English and the Germans a hundred years before they reached American soil. These cakes are still enjoyed today but also acted as the sweet foundations upon which Americans continued to create and innovate future cakes (Olver, 2015).

It is important to note that cake as we know it today had not actually been fully created when the first settlers arrived in the Americas. Advancements in baking had not

yet occurred that allowed for the creation of the typical, American, three-layered, frosted cake. What was being made was closer to sweet breads, fruitcakes, and spice cakes. These cakes lacked our modern leavening agents, refined sugars, and refined flours. They were typically single-layered and dense, often seeming to be made of more fruit than cake, and less sweet than our cakes today. Many were small and short. A common theme was dried fruit dispersed throughout. Others were plain, sponge cakes. Overall, most were dense and bread-like and sweetened by honey, molasses, or carrots. The toppings for these cakes was usually a glaze made from sugar and egg whites that was spread onto the cake. The cake would then be placed back in the oven on a low heat that would dry the coating out and harden it. The term “icing” was used for this topping (Byrn, 2016; Olver, 2015).

Only the most affluent settlers baked with refined and white sugar, while average and simplistic cakes graced the tables of the middle-class, and the poor rarely partook at all. Cake in early America was particularly indicative of social class. Virginian historian Leni Sorenson says that “The ability to make cake separated the haves from the have-nots...The poor didn’t eat sweets. They wanted fat meat like pork for sustenance. They made do with field peas. And they couldn’t afford sugar, currants, brandy, and spices” (Byrn, 2016). Cakes took a lot of time, skill, and labor to make, so they were reserved mostly for special occasions and the wealthy who often used domestic labor or employed local bakers to bake the creations (Byrn, 2016).

### **American Cookery**

Distinctly American recipes were not documented for a while after the colonists settled in America. Because so many recipes and cookbooks had simply been brought

along from Britain, France, and the Netherlands, evidence of new recipes took a long time to develop. The first American cookbook, *American Cookery*, was published 1795 by a woman named Amelia Simmons. It is “the first book of native American recipes written by an American” (Brown, 1981). This cookbook included many classic recipes that had been enjoyed for centuries, as well as recipes that made use of native ingredients. For example, cranberries were native to North America and were used in several cake recipes. Pumpkins were introduced to the colonists by the Native Americans and recipes for pumpkin pie were included in the cookbook (Brown, 1981; Olver, 2015).

Perhaps the most influential new ingredient introduced in the cookbook was “Indian meal,” or what we know today as cornmeal. It transformed the recipes available for the average person in America. The cookbook contained several cake recipes for the elite, such as “Plumb Cake,” “Rich Cake,” and “Queen’s Cake,” but it also included recipes for “Johnny Cake” (also known as “Hoe Cake”) and “Potato Cake.” These Johnny Cakes and Potato Cakes were cheap and easy to make and are perfect examples of how the word “cake” has been adapted. Johnny cakes and potato cakes are simply pancakes made from cornmeal and potatoes, respectively. Only once leavening agents were better developed and introduced into the baking world, did “cake” come to mean exclusively what it means today (Brown, 1981; Simmons, 1958).

### **Leavenings**

In order for a cake to achieve a proper rise, a leavening agent has to be used. However, it took a very long time for modern leavening agents such as baking powder to be invented. The chemical and scientific understanding of baking was still limited, although people were constantly exploring the effects of ingredients and

techniques. Foundational understanding and exploration of leavening agents produced baking powder's precursors. These predecessors were used more and more within recipes and helped cakes achieve the beginnings of the rise and lightness that our cakes have today. Examples of these early leavenings include whipped eggs, yeast, "emptins," and pearlash (Brown, 1981).

Whipping eggs was a simple technique to add more air to a cake. Before the time of electric mixers, bakers would whip eggs for hours by hand. The strength and patience required for this technique is extraordinarily impressive. However, because of how time-consuming and labor-intensive this process was, cooks looked for easier methods to help give rise. Yeast was another common leavening agent used for cakes since early cakes were so similar to breads. It was added into mixes and worked in the same manner as it did in bread. Moving away from this leavening agent in cakes was an important step in further differentiating the two (Olver, 2015).

*American Cookery* was extremely important for the introduction of two new leavening agent innovations. Simmons recommended the use of two items, "emptins" and "pearlash." Emptins was a derivative of yeast and was used a leavening agent that helped cooks to transition away from the use of yeast in cakes. It was made from the leftovers of the brewing process of beers and ciders. The process involved combining the hops with the dregs of beer or cider and whisking in flour (Brown, 1981).

While the use of emptins was a more familiar, standard method of leavening at the time, the use of pearlash truly pushed the boundary of leavening innovation. Pearlash appeared throughout Simmons' cookbook and was a uniquely American discovery. Pearlash, also commonly called potash, is the chemical, potassium carbonate, and is the

historic leavening agent was most similar to our modern baking soda or baking powder. This leavening agent was very effective; however, it posed a definite health hazard as it was made from lye and wood ashes. It was also very difficult to make and left an extremely bitter taste in the cakes. It was often masked by the heavy spices used in ginger cakes and spice cakes, but it was not appealing in the simpler pound cakes and sponge cakes that began to develop. Bakers used a variety of these methods to achieve rise in their cakes, but it would still be a while before the development of baking soda and baking powder provided a more appetizing and reliable solution (Brown, 1981; Panko, 2017).

### **Race, Class, and Cake**

The impact that slavery had on the development of food and cakes in early America is extremely important to note. The Antebellum Period was the peak period of slavery in America before the Civil War began in 1861. Sugar cane and sugar consumption was becoming increasingly popular after it had been produced for centuries in the East. With western exploration and the desire to make the commodity more cheaply available, sugar plantations were established in the Canary Islands, the Caribbean, and Brazil, primarily by Spain and Portugal. The enslavement of indigenous populations for sugar production was extremely common and slavery increased when sugar started being produced more quickly than these enslaved populations could support. The slave trade expanded to these areas and brought thousands of African slaves to these plantations. Mucci (2017) states that “during the 17th century alone, over half a million African slaves are shipped to Brazil and other New World colonies to work on sugar plantations” (Greenfield, 1979; Louisiana State Museum, 2017; Mucci, 2017).

While sugarcane was still primarily grown and imported from Brazil and other southern areas, sugar production began to also be established in the American colonies. With the Louisiana purchase in 1803, sugar plantations appeared in Louisiana and sugar production increased immensely. To support this new level of production, more and more slaves were brought in. In 1807, the importation of slaves was prohibited by the federal government; however, the domestic slave trade was not. The demand for slave labor in Louisiana grew even higher after Ribbon Cane was introduced on the plantations. This variety of sugar cane was so prosperous in the Louisiana climate that “Louisiana produced from one-quarter to one-half of all sugar consumed in the United States” (Louisiana State Museum, 2017). Domestic sugar production helped make sugar more readily available and cheaper to provide (Greenfield 1979; Louisiana State Museum, 2017; Whitney Plantation, 2015).

With increased availability of sugar, sweeter cakes and desserts became more and more popular. Typically, molasses was produced from the sugar cane and used as a sweetener. For many years raw and refined sugar were less common and use of these forms of sugar in recipes was an indicator of class. For example, “Martha Washington’s Great Cake” calls for four pounds of sugar. This enormous cake made with 40 eggs and other valuable ingredients, such as sugar, helped reinforce the Washington’s as part of elite society (Greenfield, 1979; Louisiana State Museum, 2017).

The impact of race on ingredients is clearly seen; however, an aspect of race and baking that is often forgotten is the actual production. Domestic slavery was just as common, if not more common, than plantation and field slavery. While only a small sector of the Southern population owned plantations that required slave labor, many

households in northern and southern states had domestic slaves. In these households, cooking was primarily the duty of domestic slaves. Foods and food knowledge from African origins made their way into the American diet through domestic servants. A variant of a gingerbread cake, called a Gunger Cake, is recorded to have been served by domestic slaves. This cake was a gingerbread cake recipe originating from the Congo brought over through the slave trade. The coconut also owes its existence to the slaves of the South. The coconut was brought over through the slave trade and knowledge of the proper preparation and use was shared through domestic slaves to households (Martyris, 2016; Pyatt, 2015).

The ladies of the slave-owning households took particular advantage of slave labor for the production of cakes because of the effort that was involved in creating them. “Southern cakes such as the Coconut Cake, Lane Cake, Lady Baltimore Cake, Japanese Fruit Cake, and Pound Cake were very labor-intensive...Eggs whites had to be whisked and flour incorporated by hand, the coconut had to be cracked, the meat extracted and shredded” (Martyris, 2016). The rise in popularity of such cakes would not have been possible without the heavy labor that went into their creation (Martyris, 2016).

Several domestic slaves became famous for their culinary abilities. However, it is distressingly difficult to learn about the lives, training, and contributions of these skilled cooks, as credit for their creations was almost always attributed to the ladies of the houses that owned these slaves. Food journalist Toni Tipton-Martin says, “Like other scholars, I am unable to tease apart the origin of dishes, who was the first, or who did it this way or that way, because the records are so distorted...Recipes were recorded by the slave owners as the property of the person who wrote it down” (Hix, 2016). However, there

are some cooks that we do know of. They are mostly freed slaves or lived at the end of the Antebellum period when emancipation of either them or their children allowed their contributions to be better documented. Two of these renowned chefs were Sally Seymour and her daughter Eliza Seymour Lee. Sally Seymour was the slave, cook, and mistress of Thomas Martin in Charleston, South Carolina. Thomas had Sally trained by Adam Prior, a professional French pastry chef in Charleston during the early 1790s. When Sally was freed by Thomas in 1795, she opened up her own pastry shop (Hix, 2016; Shields, 2013; Shields, 2017).

Sally was renowned and credited for many cakes. A recipe book entitled *Recipes from Old Charleston: Catherine Lee Banks Edwards (1793-1863), Charleston, South Carolina* attributes a plum pudding recipe to Sally Seymour. Sally's daughter Eliza was trained by her mother. Many slave owners would send their domestic slaves to be trained as pastry chefs under Sally Seymour as her skills were so renowned around Charleston. Eliza became extremely successful, opened up several other restaurants and hotels, and began a catering business. She was most famous for her desserts, in particular her cakes and pies. Although her skill was acclaimed, racism and classism were evident through her role as a caterer. She was the caterer for "society banquets" around Charleston, which were events for the upper-crust of Charleston such as the Jockey Club of South Carolina. The most renowned part of her career consisted of serving events she could never be a part of. She left for New York during the peak Civil War, but returned to Charleston once it was over, shocked to find that her properties had been sold. Years of litigation proved fruitless as her properties were never returned and she only received a small payment in settlement (Shields, 2013; Shields, 2017).

Several cookbooks were written by freed black slaves. One of the most famous was Malinda Russell and her cookbook *Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen*, published in 1866. This cookbook is the first known cookbook authored by an African American woman. It contains classic desserts, including one of its most popular, a pound cake recipe (O'Neill, 2007).

Even with the abolition of slavery, domestic servitude continued. Race still played a role in this, as African Americans, unable to escape the racism of the country, were common domestic workers even past the civil rights movement. White Americans from the lowest classes and immigrants were also common domestic servants, although the persistent racism in the country continued the perception of African Americans as second class citizens. These perceptions have continued long past the end of slavery and have aided the continuation of racism and classism in America and in American cooking. Clearly seen in the 1950s and 1960s through the high rate of African American domestic workers, but still seen significantly today, African American women have found it continuously difficult to escape other women's kitchens (Lam, 2015).

## **INFLUENCERS OF INNOVATION**

Just as America was going through significant changes with the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, so too was cake. Many changes could already be seen in the adaptations that were made due to the new environment. However, many more changes were soon to come. As the settlers of the United States became more comfortable with their new home and several generations had become established in America, new styles and tastes were also being created. Old traditions were being passed down while new ones were also being made.

## **Industrial Revolution**

After the Industrial Revolution reached the United States, many industries, including food production and distribution, were transformed by the ease of travel and the efficiency of new machines. This allowed for more leisure time in the expanding middle class. An increased interest in more “refined” activities such as fashion, home decor, and cuisine arose from this newly available excess (Olver, 2015).

In the realm of cooking, many products that used to be made at home on personal farms and gardens were able to be bought commercially, notably dairy products such as bottled milk. Home appliances also changed drastically. The ice box was now sold commercially, which was transformative for the shelf life and distribution of perishable products. Homes were also equipped more commonly with wood or coal ranges instead of just a fireplace, which made baking easier, quicker, and more consistent (Olver, 2015).

## **Godey’s Lady’s Book**

As the Industrial Revolution brought the easier production and distribution of magazines and newspapers across the country, one magazine gained particular popularity that had a strong influence on the baking world. *Godey’s Lady’s Book* was the most popular magazine for women throughout the nineteenth century. This magazine was first published in 1830 and gained its highest circulation during the 1860s. Its readership was national, popular from the northeast to the deep south, even reaching as far as the frontiers of the west (Accessible Archies, 2012; Spaulding, 1999).

*Godey’s Lady’s Book* contained a wide array of extremely influential topics related to health, home, and fashion. Though founded by Louis A. Godey, its editor was Sarah Josepha Hale, the first female editor of a magazine in the United States. Her

influence was strong, helping to shape the thoughts of thousands of women across the country through the magazine's articles promoting women's education, the increased presence of women teachers, and child welfare. She was also a strong proponent of the advancing the works of American writers and commissioned the works of iconic writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the publications of *Godey's* (Spaulding, 1999).

Hale also holds an extremely important role in the history of American cuisine. Often called the "Mother of Thanksgiving," she petitioned to make it a national holiday. After years of effort, hers was the influencing voice credited with convincing President Abraham Lincoln to declare an official "Day of Thanksgiving and Praise." She published many books, among which was a cookbook that included many iconic Thanksgiving recipes, including pumpkin pie (Accessible Archies, 2012; Spaulding, 1999).

Because of her love for cuisine, the publication of a wide variety of recipes was an integral part of *Godey's Lady's Book*. With its vast readership, the magazine heavily influenced the popular cake trends of its time. The magazine featured recipes in its monthly publication, including the origins of the Boston Cream Pie. This magazine had such a national spread that it became important for the standardization of recipes. As recipes from *Godey's Lady's Book* were shared across the country and repeated, a common understanding and knowledge about many cake recipes was also created (Accessible Archives, 2012; Spaulding, 1999).

## **Baking Powder**

The Industrial Revolution also brought with it something that many often overlook. Arguably the most important innovation in the development of cakes and with a surprisingly dramatic and controversial history, baking powder completely changed the game for baking and cakes in the United States.

As lightness and height are extremely important for the creation of the beloved three-layer cake of America, leavening is essential to achieving this. However, for centuries, proper leavening was extremely difficult to achieve until the creation of baking powder in 1856. Baking soda had hit the market and had been very successful; however, baking soda was not enough for a cake to rise. The addition of an activating agent was essential for the baking soda to have the desired effect. For several years, recipes were dominated by the presence of baking soda and the combination of some sort of acid such as lemon juice or cream of tartar (Civitello, 2017; Panko, 2017).

A British chemist named Andrew Bird discovered a form of baking powder in the 1840s; however modern baking powder was not brought to the US until Eben Horsford created and patented his baking powder in 1856. Eben Horsford's baking powder combined baking soda with an acid called monocalcium phosphate. He combined the two with cornstarch to remove any moisture that would start the reaction between the two ingredients too soon. The baking powder he created was activated with water. In the 1880s he began marketing his creation under the name Rumford and created Rumford Baking Powder Company. Several other companies soon began popping up, such as Royal Baking Powder Company, Calumet, and Clabber Girl. Competition between these

companies started to increase due to the different chemical makeup that each powder used (Civitello, 2017; Panko, 2017).

The main competition was between Royal Baking Powder and the alum-based companies, Calumet and Clabber Girl. Sodium aluminum phosphate is a cheaper activating acid that was much stronger than a lot of the other acids on the market. In an attempt to win over the competition, Royal Baking Powder tried to discredit Calumet and Clabber Girl by investing thousands upon thousands of dollars into advertisements praising the “purity” of Royal Baking Powder and claiming the detrimental health effects of alum. One advertisement says “The Old Reliable: Absolutely Pure, There is No Substitute” (Panko, 2017). Royal Baking Powder even brought the fight to the courts where things “culminated in 1899, when Royal managed to bribe the Missouri legislature to pass a law banning the sale of all alum baking powders in the state” (Panko, 2017). Over the next few years, many people were sent to jail simply for selling baking powder, underhand deals were made in the government, and the media uncovered a scandal involving the lieutenant governor John Adams Lee. Lee was forced to resign from his position after it was discovered he had been carrying bribe money to four members of the Senate from the Royal Baking Powder company (Civitello, 2017; Panko, 2017).

Ironically, Clabber Girl ended up acquiring both Rumford and Royal Baking Powder and are all housed today under the Clabber Girl Corporation. It took a while for bakers to begin trusting baking powder and using it as an essential baking ingredient. Years of family recipes and cookbooks were passed down that did not call for the new ingredient, so it took time to be fully integrated into the baking process and the

home. However, once it was accepted, it transformed the way cakes were baked and what could be accomplished. Where before, finding a cake with more than two stacked layers was nearly impossible, cakes were now lighter, fluffier, and more stackable. The baking process took fewer ingredients, was more reliable, and much more efficient (Civitello, 2017; Panko, 2017).

### **American Cake**

While cake is by no means an American creation, a truly American invention, synonymous with the American definition of “cake,” is the layer cake. Short, dense cakes of colonial America were the norm before the three-layered, stacked, filled, and frosted cake took precedence. Humble (67) states that “the prime virtues in American cakes are height and lightness of texture. The layer cake is considered a national invention...”. As cakes were finally able to gain proper rise due to the invention of baking soda and baking powder, the entire definition of what a cake was changed. Cakes could be even sweeter due to the more efficient production, increased availability, and lower price of sugar. Less time had to be spent on the actual baking process, and more time was spent on aesthetics (Humble, 2010).

The tall, layered cakes of baking powder America were more commonly marked by detailed and purposeful decor. With higher, layered cakes, there was more room for decadent frostings with intricate designs. Royal icing became extremely popular during this time period. Royal icing is a thick, white frosting that is most similar to the soft buttercreams and meringue frostings commonly seen today. However, it hardens naturally and allows for ornate, structural designs. This icing became popular in America after the renown of Queen Victoria’s wedding cake reached the United States. Its stiff

consistency helped lock in moisture and worked as a great preserving method to keep cakes fresh. Various types of meringue frostings also starting to become more common. These frostings remained fluffy and allowed the common three-layered cake to become more popular. From this era onward, a larger variety of cakes were able to be created and shared with more ornate and creative decor (Humble 2010; Olver, 2015).

### **Junior League, Community, and Church Cookbooks**

As seen from the Election Cake of the post-American Revolution, which was brought to the polls by women to encourage the men to come vote, to the tradition of wedding cakes and birthday cakes shared in celebration, baking is a strong community-oriented activity. With the increased ability to publish and distribute books due to the Industrial Revolution, the spread of magazines and cookbooks became much easier. Smaller communities began to increasingly publish their own anthologies of recipes. Social clubs (typically women's social clubs), community groups, and churches began frequently releasing cookbooks to bring the members together and take advantage of their joint knowledge. Through these institutions, certain recipes became more popular and baking retained its identity as a valued activity which encouraged community involvement (Zuraw, 2013).

The first community cookbook published in the United States was *A Poetical Cook-Book*, published in 1864 in Philadelphia during the Civil War. This cookbook was published in an effort to raise money to support the field hospitals for injured soldiers during the war. The concept of community cookbooks exploded and between 1864 and 1922, over 3,000 community charity cookbooks were published (Stoller-Conrad, 2012). Before women won the vote in 1920, they became involved in the community and

politics through the fundraising generated by cookbooks such as these. According to Green (2002), “In an era when females had few roles in public life, these cookbooks acknowledged their presence in the community.” A community cookbook was even published in 1886 called *The Woman Suffrage Cookbook* in Boston, Massachusetts whose funds went directly to their suffrage campaign (Green, 2002; Stoller-Conrad, 2012; Zuraw, 2013).

A cookbook entitled “76.” *A Cook Book* is a great example of a typical church community cookbook published in the 1870s by the women’s group from Plymouth Church in Des Moines, Iowa. The preface of this cookbook includes a particularly inspiring line: “Good cooking is an ally of godliness” (Ladies of Plymouth Church, 1876). The ability to cook and bake well was something highly valued by the members of these church and social communities. This church cookbook also shows how, even though a great new innovation was readily available, it still took a while for recipes to adapt. Baking powder had been on the market for about fifteen to twenty years, yet not one of the recipes in this cookbook calls for it. Most of the leavening agents called for in the recipes are yeast or some other form/combination of it. Family recipes were still being passed down that did not include baking powder. People were reluctant to make changes to beloved recipes that had long been enjoyed (Library of Congress, 2017; Ladies of Plymouth Church, 1876).

However, resistance to change did not last forever. With the creation of one of the most iconic women’s organizations in the country, community cookbooks began to spread more and more and the acceptance of adaptations and the popularity of baking trends along with them. The Junior League was founded in 1901 by social activist Mary

Harriman. This League was created as a volunteer organization whose members used the platform to raise money, support causes, and encourage community engagement. By 1917, over twenty leagues had been founded across the country. Today, there are 291 leagues around the world (The Junior League, 2018; Zuraw, 2013).

One of the most iconic activities of the Junior League is the creation and distribution of cookbooks. These cookbooks were a collaborative effort between the Leagues and the community. Recipes were gathered from the homes of local members and the repertoire of local chefs. They showcased local and regional recipes and talent. The money generated by these cookbooks was then given back to the community (Green, 2002; Zuraw, 2013).

Many beloved cake recipes were spread through these community cookbooks. For example, in a quick glance through six community cookbooks reaching from Kansas to New Jersey published between 1898 and 1913, all six of them included recipes for Angel Food Cake, Pound Cake, Devil's Food Cake, Sponge Cake, Coconut Cake, and more. Other recipes saw huge influxes in popularity. For example, although the Lady Baltimore Cake existed before its publication in a Charleston, South Carolina Junior League Cookbook, its regard as a popular cake only increased after its publication (Garden & Gun, 2016; Library of Congress, 2017).

These community cookbooks remained popular even during the trying times of the two World Wars and the Great Depression. However, they peaked in popularity during the 1950s and 1960s when the idealization of female domesticity was particularly prevalent. This interesting twist in the cookbooks' purpose holds a sort of irony. What began as a way to encourage female involvement in the community and politics when

women didn't have the vote, was turned into a way to encourage them to stay in the home.

## **WAR TIMES AND HARD TIMES**

### **World War I**

With the onset of World War I, food rationing and availability became a concern for the American population. Foods that had once been readily available were rationed and cooking was forced to adapt. Several popular cookbooks arose during this era, including *Camouflage Cookery: A Book of Mock Dishes* published by Helen Watkeys Moore in 1918, filled with adapted recipes. Another popular cookbook was *Wheatless and Meatless Days* by Pauline Dunwell Partridge and Hester Martha Conklin. This cookbook was specifically dedicated to recipes adaptations in response to the rationing of meat and wheat (Partridge and Conklin, 1918; Moore, 1918).

At the onset of World War I, white bread was extremely popular in the United States. White flour only uses one part of the wheat crop, which was deemed wasteful. Additionally, Allied forces overseas were experiencing greater food shortages than the US, so the nation donated much of its wheat to feed the Allied forces and civilians. To discourage the consumption of this crop, the United States Food Administration released food propaganda with phrases such as, "Eat more cornmeal, rye flour, oatmeal, and barley—Save the wheat for the fighters" (Traidler, 1917), and "Victory is a question of stamina: Send - the wheat, meat, fats, sugar—The fuel for fighters" (Dunn, 1917). White flour and wheat substitutions such as corn, barley, and rice flour were encouraged, as seen in Partridge and Conklin's cookbook (Hester, 2016).

Partridge and Conklin begin *Wheatless and Meatless Days* by saying, “The practical self-denial of our meatless and wheatless days is strengthening the arms and the hearts of all Americans at home in a peaceful land or abroad in the turmoil of war, as well as sending food to thousands stripped of the very necessities of existence” (Partridge and Conklin, vii). With flour being an essential component for cake, the ease with which the American people were able to make beloved desserts was diminished. The “Cakes and Cookies” section of the cookbook lists recipes for a “Potato Flour Cake,” “Barley Flour Sponge Cake,” “Potato Flour Cream Cake,” “Potato Flour Sponge Cake,” and “Old English Cheese Cakes” using rice flour. These recipes simply substitute out regular wheat flour for these various alternatives. Books such as *Wheatless and Meatless* helped alleviate the frustration of cooking in rationed times and give fantastic insight into the state of cooking in these hard times.

Partridge and Conklin preface their cookbook with some general guidelines that list “butterine” and “oleomargarine” as common butter substitutes to use. “Oleomargarine” is a word that was used to denote what is now more commonly referred to as simply “margarine.” Food substitutions have always been attractive to those consumers wishing to spend less, and those producers wishing to make more. Oleomargarine, coming from the Latin word “oleum,” meaning beef fat (referring to its main ingredient), and the Greek word “margarite,” meaning pearl (referring to the butter substitute’s slightly luminous pallor) was created by Hippolyte Mège-Mouriès, a French chemist, in 1869. Initially denounced and restricted in 1880s America because of backlash from dairy farmers, the substitute was later embraced in the 1900s during the wartime restrictions on butter and fats (Rupp, 2014).

The reduction of wheat and fats were not the only items that were rationed. It was also encouraged to reduce sugar consumption. Substitutes such as syrups and molasses were encouraged. Cakes with limited or no frostings were suggested. The United States Department of Agriculture along with the Council of National Defense released a book giving lessons for cooking during wartime and new national food requirements. This book breaks down the importance of honoring the suggestions given by the government to reduce the consumption of wheat, sugar, and fats. It specifically suggests the reduction of sugar consumption, as well as cakes and sweets consumption in general (*The Day's Food*, 1918).

All of these wartime conditions indicate the important historical and cultural changes that occurred in the country in regards to food access. This period of history affected available resources and called for a dependence on certain food innovations and substitutions. Combining all these factors, cake's identity was unquestionably impacted during this time. More practical desserts replaced the luxury that had previously been embraced. Cake went through an identity crisis, as its rich and saccharine ingredients had to be toned down and replaced and its frequency had to be reduced. Cake's flavor was threatened as it was produced with less sweet ingredients and flours that created drier or denser cake. However, the efforts that the American population went to retain its presence in their daily lives proves the value that it still held. The uplifting sweetness of cake helped to bring some light even in the darkest of times.

### **The Great Depression**

Suffering and rationing did not end with the culmination of World War I. The Great Depression soon hit in the tumultuous aftermath of the war. With the economic

crash, families were struggling to survive and put food on the table. However, the need for sweets persisted. Cakes were not eliminated from the American diet, just reduced in quantity with edited ingredients. Many of the strategies that bakeries and home cooks implemented during the rationing of World War I persisted. Some other trends became even more popular. One of these was the use of applesauce, acting as a replacement for the fats and eggs that give cake its leavening, lightness and moistness. Some cakes, such as a coconut pound cake, adapted their recipes to be placed in the oven while it was still heating up in order to save energy (Byrn, 2016; Justus, 2017).

A replacement that became even more popular was mayonnaise. The store-bought product became an easy replacement for oil and eggs, which are essential for adding lightness and structure to cake. Mayonnaise companies such as Hellman's and Duke's took advantage of this adaptation and began releasing their own recipes to help increase the sales of their product even further. This replacement actually produced an extremely moist and rich cake that remains highly popular today (Cericola, 2018).

Another common cake that became popular during the Great Depression is known by many different names across the country. Known as a Wacky Cake by many, as well as a Crazy Cake, a War Cake, a Depression Cake, a Dump Cake and more, this is a chocolate cake with no dairy or egg that was an easy and desirable cake when cake ingredients were expensive. Water replaced milk and vegetable oil replaced butter. The cake also called for baking soda and vinegar as the activating ingredient for the baking soda. Although baking powder had been invented, baking soda was a multi-use product that was often used for cleaning around the house. Using the old method of baking soda with a common acid such as vinegar, helped keep costs down even more. This recipe

also only required one pan, as all of the ingredients could be poured and mixed directly in the pan. While the cake is very simply made, many bakers would take liberties with the frosting. Many recipes also include recipes for frosting along with it that called for eggs, milk, and sugar. This is where people would indulge in their desserts. However, many other recipes for this cake simply call for a coating of powdered sugar to finish it off (Mann, 2010).

While adaptations were being made to the cakes, so too were they being made to the frostings. The American buttercream was invented in this time and it remains one of the most popular frostings today. This frosting was created because it does not require any egg whites like the other soft meringue frostings that had been the most popular. This frosting only required creamed butter and sugar to produce a very rich and sweet cake toppings that quickly became a cheap household favorite (Olver, 2015).

## **World War II**

When World War II struck, the patriotic side of baking returned. Rations were implemented once again and recipes were published in the name of the troops. The Royal Baking Powder Company released their own recipes. One of these recipes was a cake called “One-Egg Victory Cake.” This used ingredients and measurements that took rationed foods into consideration. Margarine was used over butter and, as the name specified, just one egg was called for (Rothman, 2017).

Carrot cake also started to increase in popularity during this time because of the natural sweetening that the carrots provided the cake. This helped to cut down on the amount of sugar required for the recipes. The Wacky Cake popularized during the Great Depression remained a popular cake and began to be called a War Cake during these

years. The US imported most of its sugar supply from the Philippines. However, due to the Japanese occupation of the island during World War II, the US lost a significant supply of their sugar imports. Much of the sugar that was imported from Hawaii was also reduced because the cargo ships that brought it over were being used for military purposes instead. Sugar imports continued to struggle through the Cold War. Another large sugar trade partner with the US was Cuba. During the 1950s, the US began reducing Cuban sugar imports in favor of domestic production. Since over half of Cuba's sugar exports went to the US, this change threatened Cuba's economic stability. Cuba, under Fidel Castro, turned to other countries for exports and soon began trading with the Soviet Union. Seeing this as a threat to democracy, in 1960, the US cut all sugar quotas from Cuba entirely, which destabilized sugar imports (Dye and Sicotte, 2004; Lee 1946; Walker, 2016).

However, cake remained important to the average American. The desire to indulge in sweet treats was never fully eradicated by the war-time rationing and political discord. For important events such as weddings and Christmas, people stretched where they could to still create wedding and Christmas cakes. Families would often combine their sugar rations in order to produce a wedding cake. They would work to make even the most decadent cakes, such as the fondant covered wedding cakes that had become popular in the 1920s, possible. Like in World War I and the Great Depression, there was still a strong desire for celebration in desperate times. With war rampant and the death of loved ones a constant threat, people had a strong desire for sweet distractions and they went to great lengths to make them happen.

## **RISE OF THE READY-MADE**

### **Cake Mixes**

Perhaps one of the most important developments in the history of cake was the creation of the boxed cake mix. While the invention took off after World War II, the first cake mix was actually created before the war in the 1930s by a molasses company called P. Duff and Sons. The creation of the cake mix actually came from the company's surplus of molasses. When met with the excess, John D. Duff decided to patent the process of dehydration to create a powder combination of flour, molasses, sugar, shortening, salt, baking soda, and powdered whole eggs. The mix would then simply be rehydrated with water and baked. Apart from wishing to use up their molasses, their patent also quotes another desire for the creation of the cake mix. The families of the Great Depression often just wanted a cake on the table, but, as explained in their patent:

In the ordinary preparation of pastry products, there are a large and varied number of ingredients which must be used which means keeping a complete stock of materials on hand...This is not only expensive and inconvenient, but necessitates careful measurements and mixing and, therefore, the provision of suitable apparatus therefor. In addition to the above, unsatisfactory results or failure occur too frequently which represent a serious loss of time, of money, of materials and of energy.

(Park, 2013)

The cake mix offered a new, quick, cheap, and convenient cake experience with little room for mistake. These aspects were particularly desirable during the Great Depression. However, these cake mixes did not explode in popularity right off the bat. Some

important modifications were made to make the cake mix more desirable (Greenwood, 2017; Olver, 2015; Park, 2013).

One of these important changes was the removal of the powdered eggs from the mix. The thought of a powdered egg in a cake mix was understandably unappealing to the American public. To make the mixes more appetizing and to help the buyers feel like they had more involvement in the baking process, Duff and Sons removed the powdered eggs and required the addition of several fresh eggs. The updated patent application cited this change due to the powdered eggs being “a handicap from a psychological standpoint” (P. Duff and Sons, 1935). Once this change was made, there was an increase in the product’s market popularity, although the real explosion of popularity occurred after World War II (Greenwood, 2017; Park, 2013).

The post-war explosion was not attributed to P. Duff and Sons; it was actually accomplished through the flour companies. Companies such as General Mills (the parent company of Betty Crocker) and Pillsbury, hoping to take advantage of the increased market flow after World War II began producing their own cake mixes. They heavily sold the idea of convenience and this drew in business for a very long time. However, cake mixes became almost too convenient. The little effort involved in the process and the chemical flavors that were often noticeably present didn’t make people feel like they were truly creating something, so these companies plugged into the desire for more creativity. Soon companies were adding frosting recipes or tubed frostings and instructions for creating elaborate designs. This helped encourage women to continue buying the mixes and added more involvement to the process. Once these frosting ideas were advertised and tubes of frosting were sold along with the cake mixes, the sale of

cake mixes was boosted once again and the mixes reached the home of almost every American (Greenwood, 2017; Park, 2013; Martyris, 2013).

This era of cake truly redefined baking. It was no longer an art of time-consuming effort and learned skill. It was something that was completely accessible, requiring less skill, and available anytime. To an extent, cake lost its uniqueness; it became something that was expected rather than a surprising treat for special occasions (Greenwood, 2017; Park, 2013; Martyris, 2013).

### **The “Domestic Goddess”**

At the same time that cake mixes were on the rise, so too was the idealization of the housewife. Since the early settlers made their way to America, it was always assumed that women’s role was in the home and kitchen. As seen through the prefaces of cookbooks over the centuries, the ability to successfully cook and bake was seen as an essential skill for women to preserve their role as successful housewives. The preface of *American Cookery* begins:

As this treatise is calculated for the improvement of the rising generation of Females in America, the Lady of fashion and fortune will not be displeased, if many hints are suggested for the more general and universal knowledge of those females in this country.... (Simmons, 1958)

The prefaces of the wartime cookbooks *Best War Time Recipes* and *Camouflage Cookery: A Book of Mock Dishes* and *Wheatless and Meatless Days* include the following quotes about the role of women, respectively:

This booklet is dedicated to the housewives of the United States who are assisting the Government in its work through the Food Administration.

(Royal Baking Powder Co, 1917)

In these hard times, when the housewives of the country are concerned about the conservation of food, I hope that this little book of substitute or mock dishes will prove helpful. (Moore, 1918)

Our object in the preparation of this little book at this critical time in our nation's history, when the conservation of food by the women of the country is a part of our battle array, is to put before the housewives of America, at low cost, recipes for dishes. (Partridge and Conklin, 1918)

By the 1950s, Betty Crocker had become the face of the ideal housewife and women were expected to emulate her in whatever way possible. Achieving all the ideals of the housewife in this era was becoming more and more difficult to do because, “[these women] were least likely—because of [urbanization], migration and shrinking family size--to possess the domestic skills their mothers and grandmothers and generations before them had learned by observing and doing” (Levene, 93). The hard-earned and passed-down skills of the kitchen and of housewifery, like many other areas of labor, were being lost due to the ease that technological developments had brought. Women needed to depend on someone else to show them the ropes, and tapping into a vulnerable market, Betty Crocker did just that (Avery, 2013; Byrn, 2016; Levene, 2016).

Betty Crocker was created by General Mills and she became the face of the self-named baking company. Her name, voice, and face were seen and heard over the television and radio, in magazines and books. By 1945, Betty Crocker was the second best-known woman in America, after Eleanor Roosevelt. As women were exposed more and more to the domestic perfection of Betty Crocker, she became an ideal they reached for further. However, since they no longer possessed the knowledge that the “ideal housewife” used to, they turned to Betty Crocker again to teach them how. It became a sort of never ending circle. Baking was marketed as a woman’s pride and care for her family. Baking a cake using Betty Crocker products was marketed as a woman “investing time, love, and skill in creating something stunningly beautiful” (Levene, 123). However, the day of the full-time housewife was setting. Women had entered the workforce during World War II, and many were reluctant to leave. A new type of femininity was needed in order to market towards the growing class of professional women (Byrn, 2016; Levene, 2016).

Julia Child quickly became one of the faces of the new, domestic woman. She was hard-working, clever, and strong, yet she was a master in the kitchen. Julia Child presented herself as a woman spreading her knowledge to anyone, not just housewives, that were also interested in food. Baking was moving away from being simply a dainty housewife’s task. It was now being promoted as an experience of memory-making enjoyment of the food itself, rather than a showy expression of gender-norms. The idea of the powerfully feminine baker has continued to be emulated through people like Martha Stewart. She has worked to present the domestic arts as something more than passive fulfillment of an idealized image, but as active and creative engagement by

curious women. However, this is not to say that the market has not had an influence in the creation of this new, idealized woman. Martha Stewart created a domestic empire through a strategic understanding of the modern homemaker's desires (Byrn, 2016; Levene, 2016; Stewart, 2017).

The market always reflects the attitudes of the time, and the attitudes of the time also reflect the market. The perception of idealized domesticity did not evolve on its own. The commercial market plays a huge influence in convincing women of what they want, and it has done much to shape cake products and trends over the years.

### **COMMERCIALIZATION**

Businesses are experts at seeing an opportunity and creating a need and desire for a product. The world of cake has become increasingly commercialized. Even looking back so far as the Great Depression and the World Wars, food was rationed so people needed more knowledge on how to cook under rationed times. Countless cookbooks were published in these wartime years because this market took advantage of the need they saw.

Likewise, several cakes became popular due to current events in the world. For example, Hawaii became a state in 1959 and shortly after, a huge tropical trend hit every sector of the American market. Bananas, pineapples, and coconuts became extremely popular, and vacations to tropical locations of all sorts were being heavily advertised. In the midst of the tropical fad, Jamaica Airlines created a cake that was filled with bananas, cinnamon, and pineapple and began serving it at promotional events to try and convince people to fly with them for a tropical vacation. The airline's logo included a hummingbird and the cake soon became known as the Hummingbird Cake. *Southern*

*Living* printed a recipe and it remains one of their most popular recipes ever (Byrn, 2016).

The rise of the Red Velvet Cake's popularity was also in response to the market. The Velvet cake was already a popular cake known for its fine texture created by the addition of cornstarch. Originally, Red Velvet Cakes were not created with the addition of food coloring. A chemical reaction between the acid in cocoa and buttermilk would react with the base of baking soda and create a red tint in the batter. More and more recipes began popping up called "Demon Cake" or "Devil's Cake." Around the same time, the federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act in 1938 was passed which more effectively regulated the safety of color additives in foods. The Adams Extract company, hoping to increase sales, especially during the midst of World War II and the threat of extracts being considered unhealthy or dangerous, released a recipe for a red mahogany cake using their red food dye. They began selling their recipe alongside their dyes and other popular baking ingredients. The cake grew in popularity, but it was not until it was featured in the 1989 film *Steel Magnolias*, with an armadillo-shaped, red velvet groom's cake, that the cake's popularity truly exploded. Its popularity has only continued to grow. According to Severson (2014), "by 2013, [red velvet cake flavoring] was in 4.1 percent of [all menu] items" (Byrn, 2016; Severson, 2014).

The origins of another market dominating cake begin with the rise of soda during the temperance movement. When Coca-Cola was created, the company marketed it heavily in the South as an alternative to alcohol and its popularity spread across the country. It is impossible to pinpoint the very first appearance of a Coca-Cola cake, but they began appearing sometime in the 1960s. Several recipes were featured in Junior

League Cookbooks and Coca-Cola cake soon became a Southern staple. Cracker Barrel took advantage of this popularity and in 1997, wishing to increase its partnership with Coca-Cola, the restaurant decided to feature a Coca-Cola cake on the menu. The menu item was so popular that it became a permanent menu item and in 2012, over 2 million slices of the cake were sold at Cracker Barrels around the country (Byrn, 2016; Zelevansky, 2013).

### **MODERN CAKES**

Our modern world of cake today is still marked by the desires of the market. However, due to the rise of media, both entertainment and social, there has been an increase in the entertainment value of cakes. Cake has been heavily featured in modern entertainment, specifically in TV. Shows such as *Cake Boss*, *Ace of Cakes*, *Cupcake Wars*, *D.C. Cupcakes*, and many more feature the entertaining and competitive sides of cake.

This has shown a transition from the flavorful to the visual way that the American public evaluates cake. As seen from the onslaught of the cake mix, there has been a significant increase in focusing on the visual appeal of cake. Now that the American public consumes more cake through a screen than by eating it, the perception of cake is based almost entirely on visuals. Structural designs and intricate frostings are the focus of the modern cake. Instagram accounts and YouTube channels of bakers and decorators have garnered millions of followers such as Rosanna Pansino's Instagram and YouTube accounts with 3.5 million and 9.8 million followers, respectively. Her account features cakes shaped as everything from Starbucks cups, to penguins, to pizza. This account

shows the extent to which creators are still pushing the limit of cake design and creation (Pansino, 2011; Pansino, 2012).

Others are taking old techniques and bringing them to the mainstream. The use of an old French technique called mirror-glaze is making a comeback due to the extremely visually pleasing nature of the gelatin, sugar, and water combination. Bakers will receive millions of views on their Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook videos of cakes covered in the glaze. Pansino's mirror glaze cake video received over 18 million views on YouTube (Pansino, 2016). The comebacks of techniques such as these show how modern media and the attraction of the visually appealing have created mainstream trends in the cake world that would not have become trends before (Pansino, 2016; Saelinger, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

This history of cake in America started before the settlers even landed in early America. For centuries cake had been developing in Europe and what was known about baking was brought over. Combined with knowledge from the Native Americans and adapted to the new region, baking and cake began to take on a distinctly American identity. Through the developments of early America, to the innovation of the Industrial Revolution and the beginnings of baking powder, through wars and depression, to the creation of the cake mix, cake has undergone many transformative changes. Cake has its roots in the cultures of the colonial settlers, but it also has roots in the slaves that were forced to produce its ingredients. It was impacted by the wars that America became involved in and the crises its people underwent. It was transformed by the idealization its creators strived for and the gender roles that were enforced upon it. Its identity also lies in the joy and innovation it encouraged and the celebration is brought through sharing.

The formation of cake's identity in America is a long history, and it is a history that is changing even now. As modern innovations and technology continue to develop, so too will cake. However, despite all of the changes to its identity, cake will forever remain a treat capable of bringing a smile and a sweetness you can always count on.

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