

Title of the Satellite Meeting: Innovative approaches in engaging people with local history and genealogy

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Cookbooks as Local History and Genealogy Sources

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Abstract:

Over the past 10 years, Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) has made it a priority to collect Mississippi community cookbooks. Community cookbooks are created by church groups, woman's clubs, and other organizations to raise money for the groups. The cookbooks are a compilation of recipes submitted by members of the organizations and include the names of the people who recommended the recipes. Most people use these books to find recipes for dinner, but the cookbooks can also be used as local history and genealogical resources.

The Mississippi Community Cookbook Project has grown over the years to become the largest collection of Mississippi cookbooks in the world. The creation of this collection is a collaborative endeavor between curator Jennifer Brannock and history professor Andrew P. Haley. Through their efforts, cookbooks have taken on a life outside the kitchen. They can be used to tell the the histories of forgotten clubs and towns, while focusing on the lives and work of the women who created these cookbooks.

Community cookbooks are warmly embraced by local groups and cookbook enthusiasts. To publicize the use of these cookbooks as local history and genealogical resources, Special Collections at USM has hosted annual cookbook events where Dr. Haley gives a talk about one cookbook and attendees prepare items from the cookbook for a potluck dinner. In addition to these events, more than 150 cookbooks have been digitized and are available online for researchers around the world.

This presentation highlights the cookbook collection at USM and how cookbooks can be used for local history and genealogical research. The talk will also focus on the efforts to use cookbooks to engage with users locally and online.

Keywords: local history, genealogy, cookbooks, gender, publicity

When I moved to Mississippi 19 years ago, I learned that food is important to the people in that area. From Cajun food to fried catfish to comeback sauce, Mississippians love their food. To help preserve

this culinary culture, Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi has been collecting cookbooks from around the state with a focus on community cookbooks.

When I started at the university, or Southern Miss as it is known, we owned fifteen cookbooks that were collected by a previous librarian thanks to a small collection development grant. As the curator for the Mississippi books, I knew that a cookbook collection, especially community cookbooks, would be valuable resources to preserve Mississippi's culinary history and provide research tools on the food culture of the state. [Image 1]

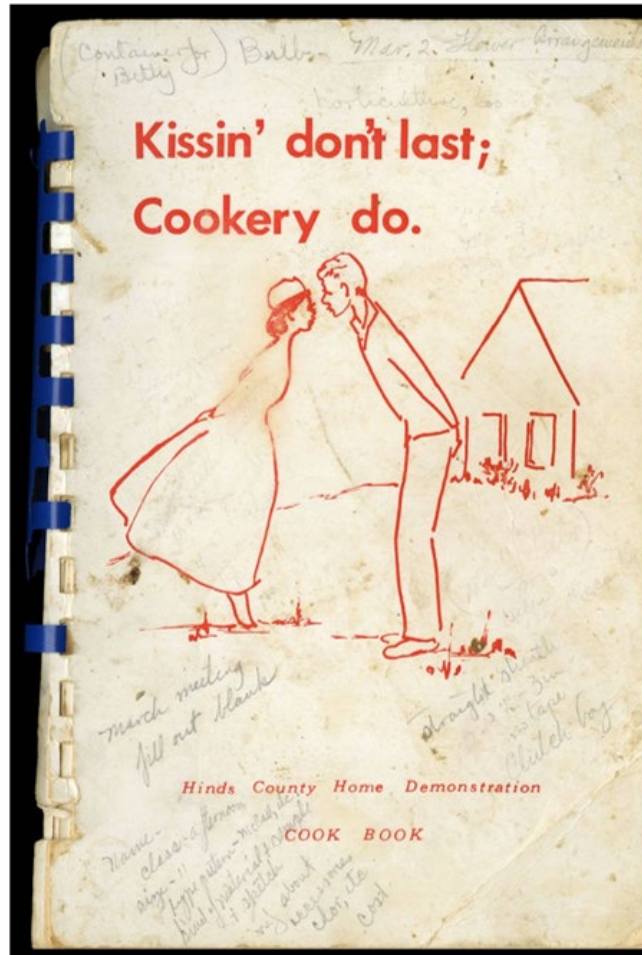


Image 1: *Kissin' Don't Last; Cookery Do* (c1955)

Created before the start of the American Civil War in 1861, community cookbooks are sold by a church or civic organization to raise money for a cause. The groups may fundraise to send students on a field trip, buy plants for a public garden, or assist with church activities. These books also taught women how to cook, and they provided limited information about the organizations. An identifying element of the community cookbooks is that the name of the woman who submitted each recipe is listed with their submission.

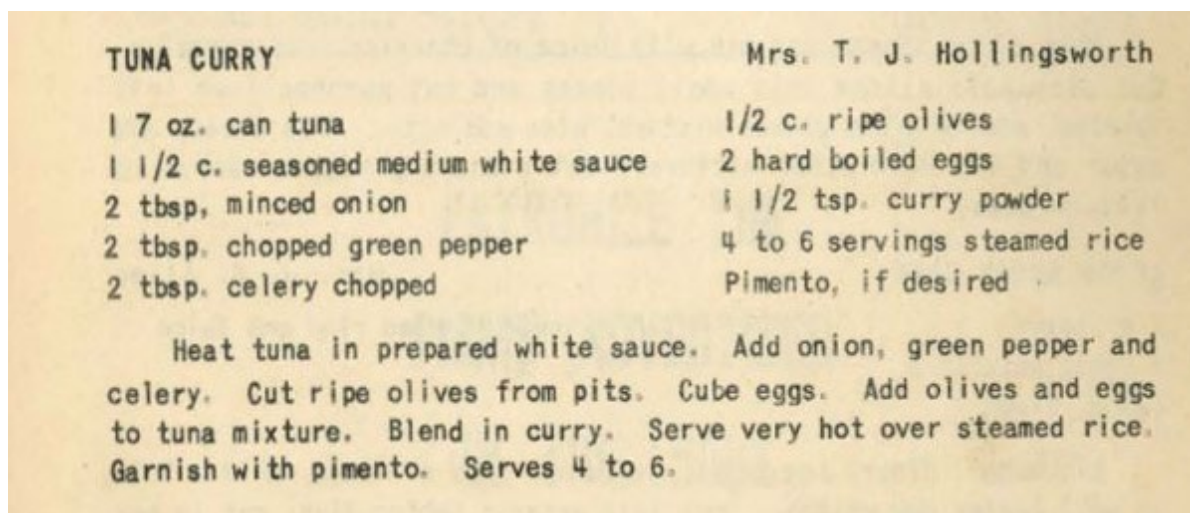


Image 2: *Inverness Cook Book* (1968)

In 2014, I worked with Southern Miss professor and food historian Dr. Andrew Haley on a digital humanities project (Mississippi Community Cookbook Project) that focused on community cookbooks as representations of the culinary culture of the area. Digital humanities was new to the university, and we were trying to explore the research value of these items. The project was short-lived due to funding, but it pushed us to delve deeper into locally-produced cookbooks.

As of last month, we have 1,800 Mississippi community cookbook titles, as well as 2,700 other cookbooks that include books about food in southern United States, influential American and French cookbooks, and other related items. We do collect these in editions, so for some titles we may have five or six printings of each book.

As I mentioned, we collect community cookbooks to preserve Mississippi history and culture, but I want to emphasize the unique ways that researchers can use them for their projects. Many local food enthusiasts want to discuss topics like how the tamale got to Mississippi or the evolution of chicken spaghetti over the past 50 years. Honestly, most of the time, people are just hunting for a recipe to cook for dinner. Looking at the cookbooks and the recipes with fresh eyes, one can see beyond these recipes to encounter information about the local communities, organizations, the role of women, and race relations in the state. By reading introductory text, analyzing images, looking at advertisements, and exploring the types of recipes and ingredients used, a story emerges that may not have been intended by the authors and compilers.

Because community cookbooks list the names of those who submitted recipes, you can identify these women and research them as one would ancestors. Using resources like Ancestry or FamilySearch, you look up the women and pull together a history of the organizations and communities through these members. Through the lives of the women featured in the cookbooks, you learn about their families, organizations, and standing in the communities.

Coahoma Cooking: Everyday and Sunday Too [Image 3] which was produced by the Coahoma Woman's Club in 1952, looks at the history of Coahoma, Mississippi, and the Mississippi Delta, as well as a description of the cookbook and its recipes with a particular look at images found in the book that reflect racial stereotypes.



Image 3: *Coahoma Cooking: Every Day and Sunday Too* (1952)

When looking at cookbooks, it is always a promising idea to sit back and review the books looking for a hidden narrative. *Coahoma Cooking*'s story focuses on adherence to antiquated and racist thoughts on southern life and racial stereotypes. The naming conventions of recipes seems to distinguish between recipes belonging to the white matrons of the households and the African-American women who worked in the homes. If you have looked at community cookbooks before, you will notice that recipes are attributed to the women who submitted the recipes. *Coahoma Cooking* is unique because the recipes are not attributed after the recipe as is often the case.

The recipe titles include the names of the “owners” of the recipes. In this cookbook, you will find recipes like Mrs. Wooton's Jam Cake or Mrs. Vaught's Paradise Pudding [Image 4], or Mrs. Elmer Morgan's Pecan Cake. Next to these recipes, you will see some that use the first name of the owners omitting the Missus or Miss. Examples of these include Fannie's Mints, Ila's Baking Powder Muffins, Daisy's Toasted Cheese Boxes [Image 5], and Keesee's Scalloped Oysters. One may guess that these recipes belonged to the African-American women who worked in the homes because they did not use courtesy titles like Mrs. or Miss. Unique to this book, the African-American cooks were designated as owners of the recipes, which is not the case in other cookbooks where the white housewives often claimed ownership of the recipes of the women who worked in their kitchens. For many African-American women in the early to mid 20th century, their recipes were often considered their main assets especially when trying to find employment.

MRS. VAUGHT'S PARADISE PUDDING

1 pkg, lemon jello	1 pt. boiling water
$\frac{1}{2}$ c. nuts (blanched almonds)	12 marshmallows cut fine
6 macaroons crushed	12 crystallized cherries
$\frac{1}{8}$ t. salt	$\frac{1}{4}$ T. sugar
	1 c. whipped cream

Dissolve jello in boiling water and chill. When slightly thickened beat with rotary beater like whipped cream. Combine all but whipped cream. Fold in cream. Mold in loaf pan. This recipe serves 8.

Image 4: *Coahoma Cooking: Every Day and Sunday Too* (1952)

DAISY'S TOASTED CHEESE BOXES

$\frac{1}{2}$ lb. grated American cheese	1 t. mustard
$\frac{1}{2}$ pt. mayonaise or prepared salad dressing	1 T. Durkee
1 T. Worchestershire sauce	Salt and pepper to suit taste

Mix cheese and mayonnaise. Add seasoning. Cut rounds or squares of bread. Spread bottom square with cheese mixture. Then top with another square and spread with mixture. When ready to serve, toast in oven - moderate heat - 400°. Mixture will keep in refrigerator. Will make one pint. A little onion juice or garlic may be added to mixture if desired.

***See Special Recipes**

Image 5: *Coahoma Cooking: Every Day and Sunday Too* (1952)

Published in 1953, *Cook Book* produced by the Home Demonstration Club in Sylvarena, Mississippi, is a perfect example of the importance of community cookbooks as local history artifacts. Sylvarena is a village of 100 people in a rural area of the state. There are no books published about this small town, and without that written history, the legacy of the village will be forgotten. As you can see in this picture, we only have four resources on the community – two are telephone directories and two are cookbooks. Most researchers would never consider cookbooks as viable local history resources, but in the case of this small village, those are the only resources available. By looking at the women who submitted recipes and tracing their lives in newspapers and genealogical databases, you can start to pull together the sense of the community and village.

In a time, when history was based on the experiences of men, these cookbooks are some of the only resources that focus on the history and lives of women and the things they accomplished. Yes, cookbooks are collections of recipes, but they are also historical resources that delve into the areas of life that traditional history ignores.

Since we were building this collection of cookbooks, how did we go about publicizing it and letting people know that they can use it? From the beginning, we digitized select cookbooks and put them in our Digital Collections [Image 6] for people to access worldwide. We are limited as to what we can include because of copyright issues, but we have made every effort to look at copyright holdings of the items. At this time, we have over 150 cookbooks available online.

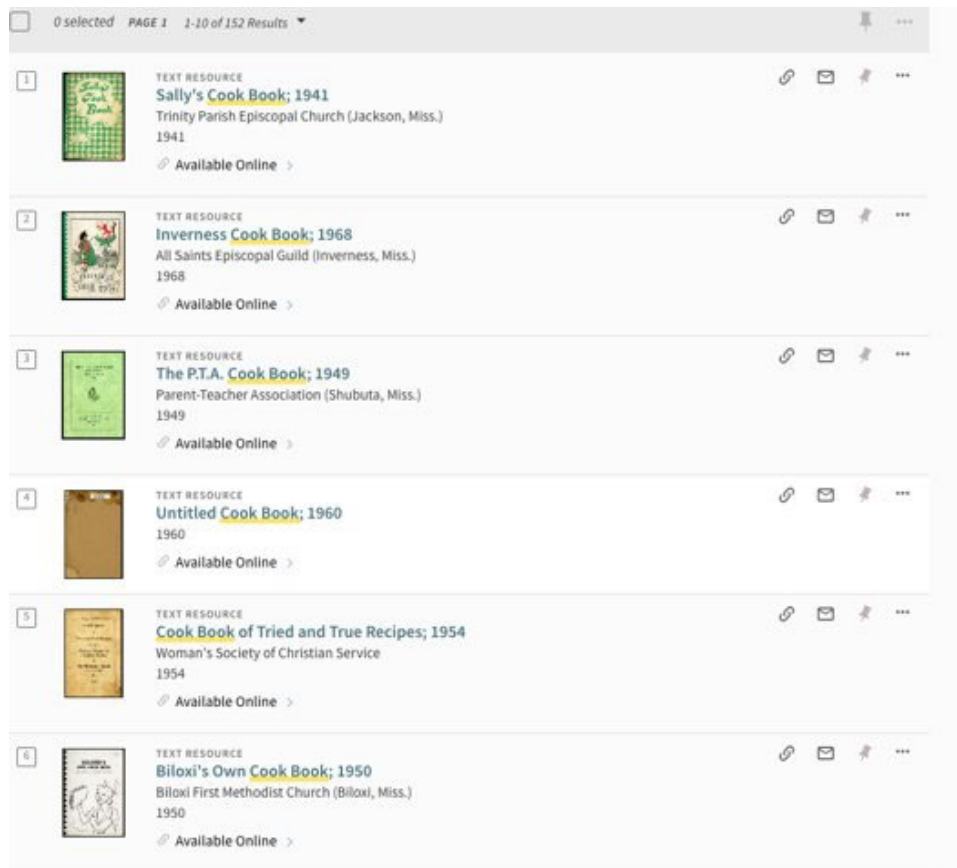


Image 6: Screenshot from the University of Southern Mississippi's Digital Collections showing the results of a cookbook search.

To promote the use of cookbooks and encourage donations, we sponsored annual cookbook talks from 2014-2021, where history professor Andrew Haley would talk about one cookbook in the collection and the story that it tells. In October 2016, Dr. Haley gave a talk about the Calhoun City, Mississippi, cookbook *Cook Book: A Few Tried and Trusted Recipes* published in 1961 and created by the mothers of high school seniors to raise money to send them on a trip to Washington D.C. Haley's talk focused on how the recipes in the book reflected the changes in food preparation to address a time when women were increasingly working outside the home. A prominent garment factory was built in the town, which employed mainly women, who were no longer able to focus their efforts on taking care of the home fulltime. This cookbook illustrates the rise of quick food like Jello and casseroles, dishes that could be made a day in advance, frozen, and placed in the oven by a teenager when they get home from school. Prior to the talk, we hosted a potluck dinner, where attendees were encouraged to prepare food from the cookbook for everyone to try. Next to each dish I placed the recipe, so that people could take pictures of the ones they enjoyed. This added a fun element to the talk by tasting the food featured in the cookbooks. The food also contributed to lively conversations about which dishes were tasty and which ones were not. [Image 7]



Image 7: Molded cabbage salad prepared for a potluck in conjunction with a scholarly cookbook talk.

The talk about the Calhoun City cookbook was particularly interesting because we had three people who drove down from Calhoun City for the talk, and they brought a dish that one attendee's mother had contributed to the cookbook. As the daughter was setting up her dish, she told us that the recipe her mother submitted was not accurate. Her mother did not want all her friends to have the recipe she cherished, so she changed the ingredients in the submitted recipe, so that it was inferior to her preparation of the dish. In addition to the wildly successful cookbook talks, we have publicized the collection in the media and created cards that give a recipe from our cookbooks. I brought a bunch of these today if anyone is interested in taking some home.

When we started collecting cookbooks, I thought that I was only preserving the recipes of the region. Once I started collaborating with Dr. Haley, the project expanded to include looking at these resources in unique ways. They were more than a compilation of recipes. These books documented the histories of small towns, communities, food, and the women who were involved in the towns. Now, when local history and genealogy researchers visit, we recommend cookbooks as viable resources. They are initially hesitant to use the materials, but after a short explanation, they see the value of the items and embrace a creative way to use these cookbooks in their research.