

UP FRONT



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

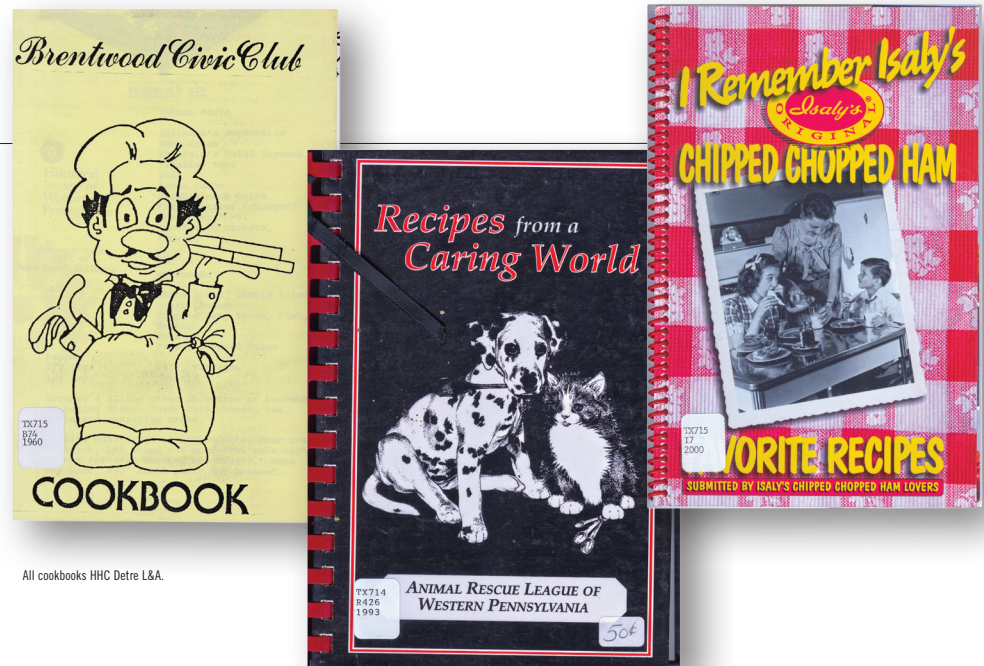
LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By John Paul Deley, Vice President,
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Eating Good in the Neighborhood: The Library and Archives' Cookbook Project

On the eighth floor of the Garfield Heights Senior high-rise on Fern Street throughout the 1980s, my grandmother, like Pittsburghers everywhere, made chipped ham sandwiches. This ham, thinly sliced from a processed loaf of pork trimmings and seasonings, was mixed with a homemade BBQ sauce and served on thick slices of white bread.¹ A local product, usually purchased from Isaly's (though Kroger and Giant Eagle also sold variations under a miscellany of brand names), is thought of as a Pittsburgh classic.

Isaly's promotional literature referred to it as a "hometown favorite for generations"² and as the "finest and most economical sandwich meat" that could be "creamed, fried, or added to beans or eggs."³ But even though this symbol of regional cultural identity was heralded as a madeleine-like "Pittsburgh tradition,"⁴ its iconic taste varied considerably from one household or lunch counter to the next. The extensive cookbook collection in the Detre Library & Archives documents a score of different recipes and serving methods for this tasty blue collar treat. Even Isaly's own promotional literature⁵ noted that the ham could be heated in a skillet, put on a hoagie, served with noodles, or as an hors d'oeuvre, placed in a breakfast pouch, rolled in a cheese ball, or placed in a casserole.



All cookbooks HHC Detre L&A.

In *Before and Afterthoughts*, Barbara Challis of the Junior League of Pittsburgh shared a recipe for Hot Chipped Ham Dip (using cream and cream cheese)⁶; in the Allegheny County Federation of Women's Clubs *Federations Favorites Cookbook* a recipe by Lillian Kelley of Wilkinsburg used chili sauce, cloves, and mustard in the BBQ sauce⁷; in *Bridgeville, 100 Years of Cooking*, Andrea Gardner offered a sauce recipe that included Worcestershire, cider vinegar, and bottled ketchup; and in the *United Methodist Youth Foundation Cookbook* of Ingomar, Pa., Kim McClure imparted a recipe for a chipped ham sandwich that contained hard boiled eggs, mayonnaise, and Velveeta cheese.⁸

Comparative analysis of the Heinz History Center cookbook collection (and Pittsburgh foodways) has been made easier by the work of volunteer Rosemary Kovacs who has created a database that serves as a portal to better understanding how regional cookbooks are a guide for understanding Pittsburgh area culture and culinary norms. It is inherently less fattening to read about food than to eat it and the collection (some of the oldest go back to the 1880s though earlier almanacs published recipes for making syrup, wine and butter) reflects on more than 200 years of social change and anthropological innovation

(cooking as ethnic tradition, as an expression of love, as an evolution of roles for the cook—from homemaker to business executive to something beyond gender stereotypes). Foodies will find the database a first stop in better appreciating the Russian, French, Italian, or English approaches to braised beef, the countless variations in Eastern European Easter breads, and subtleties of cooking with German beer.

Personal and neighborhood preferences also become evident. Fred Rogers contributed a banana bread recipe to a collection of *Fine Recipes from the Winchester Thurston School*⁹ where Mr. McFeely offered a recipe for popovers.¹⁰ Westmoreland County's Arnold Palmer (Youngstown, Pa.) added a recipe for Hawaiian Meatballs to the *Recipes from a Caring World* published by the Animal Rescue League of Western Pennsylvania.¹¹ Franco Harris lent his celebrity to a Three Bean Bake in *A book of favorite recipes*, compiled by St. Peter's Child Development Centers and the McGinnis Sisters Special Foods Stores.¹² Rationing during wars, celebrations for birthdays, tailgating, picnicking, and Sunday dinners are all celebrated in cookbooks. Pittsburgh's burgeoning restaurant culture was foreshadowed by those cookbooks that were the products of the region's corporate past: the



Westinghouse Cookbooks (features use of “the modern kitchen”),¹³ the Heinz Cookbooks (highlight the use of its products),¹⁴ Duquesne Light’s Home Services Department’s book of canning jellies and jams,¹⁵ and Alcoa accenting applications of tin foil in a myriad of time-saving cooking processes and methodologies for parties.¹⁶

In addition to published texts there is the beautifully handwritten cookbook from a South High School Domestic Science Class, First Semester Cooking 1915-16. It includes an index and recipe for “Pittsburgh Potatoes,”¹⁷ the Mrs. James Hemphill recipe book, about 50 handwritten recipes in a copy (composition) notebook from 1930,¹⁸ and two stenographer’s notebooks filled with newspaper and other clipped recipes by Kay Neumann who aired on WDTV and her recipes were printed in the *Sun-Telegraph* between 1950 and 1960.¹⁹

Pittsburgh newspapers, schools, churches, civic groups, restaurateurs, and community associations all published recipes. Rosemary Kovacs notes that, “Often direct exploration of cookbooks yields wonderful discoveries that wouldn’t have become apparent during

a more targeted search. The spreadsheets provide a feel for the holdings.” She invites all Pittsburghers to come in for the fun of exploring these resources: “You never know what treats you might find.”

Researchers can tell a lot about a region and its people by the type of cookbooks they publish. For all the differences in our always hungry city and state, food is one of the few daily rituals we have in common. What we ate, when and where we ate it, and how it has come to trigger honored memories of custom, special events, family holidays, nights out on the town, or late-night snacks with friends all are important parts of the Pittsburgh story. 🌟

Find the Cookbook Database link at: <https://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/detre-library-archives/resources>

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chipped_chopped_ham.
- ² “I Remember Isaly’s Chipped Chopped Ham, Favorite Recipes” company publication, 2000.
- ³ Brian Butko. *Klondikes, Chipped Ham, & Skyscraper Cones: The Story of Isaly’s* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 2001), p. 24.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ “I Remember Isaly’s.”
- ⁶ *Before and After Thoughts* (Junior League of Pittsburgh), p. 128. [TX714.B3877]

⁷ *Federation Favorites*, p. 95. [TX 715.T4F4]

⁸ *United Methodist Youth Foundation Cookbook*, p. 96. [TX 715.154]

⁹ *An acquired taste: A Collection of Fine Recipes from Winchester Thurston School & Pittsburgh Celebrities and Restaurants*, c. 2000, p. 253.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

¹¹ *Recipes from a Caring World* (Animal Rescue League of Western Pennsylvania, 1993), p. 123.

¹² *A book of favorite recipes*, compiled by St. Peter’s Child Development Centers, Inc., and McGinnis Sisters Special Food Stores, 1989, p. 119.

¹³ *The Betty Furness Westinghouse Cookbook* by Julia Kiene, c. 1954.

¹⁴ For example, see *The condiment cookbook: delicious dishes with dash* (compiled and edited by the home economists of the H.J. Heinz Company, c. 1974).

¹⁵ *Canning and jellies, jams and preserves* (Duquesne Light Company, Home Services Department), 1942.

¹⁶ Conny Von Hagen, *401 party and holiday ideas from Alcoa* (New York: Golden Press, c. 1971).

¹⁷ Helen M. Miller collection, cookbook notebook. Accession #1999.0235 p. 27.

¹⁸ Mrs. James Hemphill Recipe Book, 1930, Accession #2000.023.

¹⁹ Newspaper clippings of the Kay Newman columns on cooking and recipes, 1950-1960. Accession #1999.0181.