

The Purity Flour Cookbook: An Example of Women's Resilience in Wartime Canada

Cassandra Burbine

There is a major precedent for studying recipe books as historical documents. In her article “Irish Manuscript Recipe Books as Sources for the Study of Culinary Material Culture,” Madeline Shanahan explains that recipe books can inform researchers about “people’s changing relationships with goods, and an emerging consumer identity.”¹ For Shanahan, by understanding people’s relationship with food, we can further explore their relationships with economics, art, and their loved ones. In other words, food is foundational to the world we build and inhabit. By applying this logic to recipe books from the twentieth century, we can gain a better understanding of the major political and societal changes that took place. In particular, these methods of thinking can allow us to think about the people who owned those objects, and learn about the stories hidden within them. I will be approaching my analysis with these ideas of socioeconomics and culture in mind, considering how recipe books hold a special kind of materiality.

In this essay, I will argue that recipe books can be understood as legitimate historical sources, both through their written information and materiality as physical objects. I will do this by examining two specific copies of Purity Flour Cookbooks, instructional recipe guides that were at the height of their popularity in the mid twentieth-century. Discussing the history of Purity Flour as a brand and its foundations in the wheat boom, the synthetic flour debate, and overall Canadian identity will contextualize the cookbooks themselves. This will then allow me to study a cookbook from about 1930 in relation to the Great Depression, exploring how it affected the production of food and Canadian cuisine. Expanding this analysis, I will turn to a copy of the 1945 edition, explaining the significance of food rationing during the Second World War. Considering all of this information in relation to the biography of the 1945 cookbook will unveil a story of resilience showcased through a maternal line of women from small-town Nova Scotia.

¹ Madeline Shanahan. “Whipt with a Twig Rod”: Irish Manuscript Recipe Books as Sources for the Study of Culinary Material Culture, c. 1660 to 1830,” in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 115C (2015), 197.

Methodology

In *Visual Methodologies*, Rose outlines the basic concepts surrounding the “social lives of objects,” followed by the materiality and subsequent observability of her objects.² She breaks these main ideas down further through the analysis of specific objects. Rose approaches her writing with the idea that material objects gain meaning and history with each new owner or creator.³ By doing so, she introduces the idea that people’s lives influence and revolve around the objects they engage with. Building off this approach, I will also consider Kopytoff’s conception of the biographical approach. He outlines this idea in his chapter of Arjun Appadurai’s *The Social Lives of Things*. For Kopytoff, objects can be studied through their own biography, representing a relationship between the object, its owner(s), and commodification.⁴

Likewise, Gvion’s ideas concerning the intersections between poverty and cuisine are useful in exploring the Purity Flour Cookbooks. In her article, *Cuisines of Poverty as Means of Empowerment: Arab Food in Israel*, Gvion explains that “[cuisines] of poverty constitute gender-based domestic stocks of knowledge.”⁵ Although these structures and traditions change culture to culture, poverty cuisines are most often based around women’s unpaid time and labour. Gvion goes on further to explain that food that rises out of poverty is intrinsically linked to power, culture, and identity.⁶ These elements all work together to form ideas, emotions, and memories that are born out of this poverty. There is empowerment, then, in the foods that people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds can create and can also serve as a sign of resilience. Although Gvion’s article mainly discusses contemporary Palestine and the dynamics of that specific nation, her mode of thinking can be applied to wartime cuisines. Following Gvion’s logic we can recontextualize Canadian wartime recipes as proof of women’s resilience. Overall, I will be combining these three methods, studying the lives of the objects I draw on through the experiences of the women who owned them, and using their socioeconomic situations as backdrops for the entire discussion.

² Gillian Rose, “An Anthropological Approach,” *Visual Methodologies* (2001): 217.

³ Rose, “An Anthropological Approach,” 224-226.

⁴ Igor Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things: commodification as process” in *The Social Lives of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 67-68.

⁵ Liora Gvion, “Cuisines of Poverty as Means of Empowerment: Arab Food in Israel,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 23, no. 3 (2006), 299-312.

⁶ Gvion, “Cuisines of Poverty,” 299-312.

Purity Flour as a Brand

The two cookbooks I will be studying are two different editions of the *Purity Flour Cookbook*. The first, printed sometime around 1930, is coverless. The pages are tattered and frayed, browning along the edges. A few central pages are slowly disintegrating, and the entire book is heavy with age (fig. 1). The book's introductory pages have also been lost to time, and as

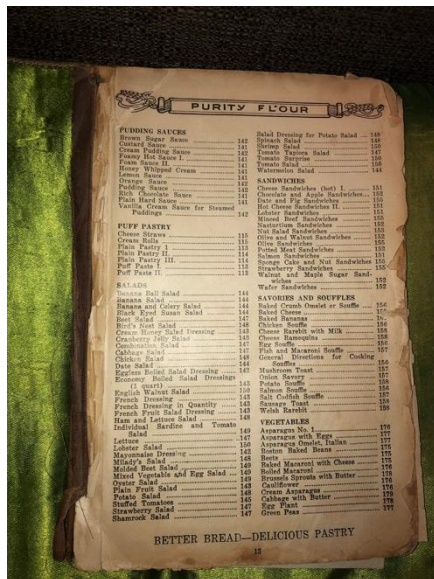


Figure 1

such, it begins with the middle of the table of contents, the first recipe listed on page 142. The illustrations of the book, however, remain vibrant and colourful, standing starkly against the aged parchment. The second book, printed in 1945, has a dark burgundy cover with a

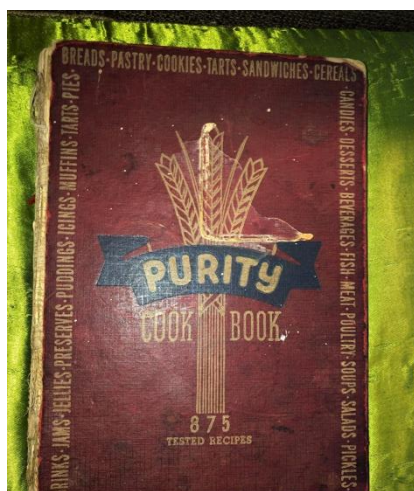


Figure 2

minimalist illustration of wheat (fig. 2). It reads “Purity Flour Cookbook; 875 Tested Recipes,” with each section title of the book used as a border. Its pages are tattered but not nearly as frayed as the earlier edition, and it includes an introduction, conversion and temperature charts, as well as an early version of the Canadian Food Guide.

Likewise, there are tables in the back of the book outlining how to properly can and preserve a variety of ingredients and diagrams of livestock explaining each cut of meat. The book serves as a how-to guide for housewives, new and old, grounded in cooking techniques and styles that benefited those just coming out of the Second World War. Nearly every recipe includes one key ingredient — Canadian Purity Flour. Flour became tied to Canadian identity when the wheat industry began to expand significantly around 1890. This was the result of a wave of immigration from Eastern-European countries, such as Ukraine and Germany, to the Canadian Prairies.⁷ These settlers farmed the land, and the economic growth associated with this period became known as “Canada’s wheat boom,” which lasted from about 1890 to 1910.⁸ The combination of product, income, and settler culture worked to form a new aspect of Canadian identity.⁹ This Prairie-settler identity viewed the landscapes of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta as tameable in terms of economic growth and geographic expansion, and worked as an inherently anti-Indigenous mindset to inspire a capitalist culture which led to the mass production of flour in Canada.

Purity Flour originated in Manitoba in 1905 during the “wheat boom.”¹⁰ The brand grew out of the organization known as Western Canada Flour Mills and later amalgamated with other milling companies into what is now called Maple Leaf Foods.¹¹ Western Canada Flour Mills branded their product as Purity Flour Mills in order to communicate the idea of a “pure” and “untouched” product with their customers.¹² Purity Flour Mills, unsurprisingly, mainly functioned as a flour milling and processing plant, but grew their corporation to include the manufacturing of recipe books.¹³ This move allowed them to advertise their product in a

⁷ Gordon W. Bertram, “The Relevance of the Wheat Boom in Canadian Economic Growth,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics / Revue Canadienne d’Economie* 6, no. 4 (1973), 552.

⁸ Tony Ward, “The Origins of the Canadian Wheat Boom, 1880-1910,” *The Canadian Journal of Economics / Revue Canadienne d’Economie* 27, no. 4 (1994), 867.

⁹ Nathan Smith “Labour Pains: Thunder Bay’s Working Class in Canada’s Wheat Boom Era (review),” *The Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 3 (2011), 560.

¹⁰ “Purity Flour Cook Book,” University of Guelph, accessed November 28, 2021.

¹¹ Murray Peterson, “Historic Sites of Manitoba.”

¹² Brian Payne, “Nature’s Bread: The Natural Food Debate in Canada, 1940–1949,” in *Agricultural History* 93, no. 4 (Fall, 2019), 615.

¹³ “Purity Flour Cook Book,” University of Guelph.

truly intimate way, bringing the company into the homes of thousands across the country. As the pressure for housewives to provide top-notch ingredients and nutrition for their families grew, so too did the product's popularity.¹⁴

Beginning in the 1920s with the discovery of vitamins in food, there was a cultural shift, particularly in the United States and Canada, in favour of “whole foods” like grains and vegetables.¹⁵ Food insecurity became more apparent because of the Great Depression, and worsened leading into the Second World War. The drive for the wealthy and working classes to provide not only food, but “whole” and “healthy” food strengthened the divide between them.¹⁶ Bread was seen as the “material and symbolic value as the principal foodstuff of the masses,”¹⁷ it held significance as a unifying force, and as a cultural symbol of wealth, health, and happiness. In this way, flour was the thing that brought the lower and upper classes together, but also the thing that ripped them apart.

Since much of the bread that was produced in the wake of the Great Depression had few vitamins and held little nutritional value, Canadian flour companies sought to combat this by showcasing their flour's naturalness and “purity.”¹⁸ By moving away from synthetic vitamins and minerals, Canadian flour milling companies created both a sense of national pride during these troubled times, as well as a sense of panic. Families, and especially housewives, struggled while attempting to get the best flour and products for their families as a way to support the economy and later the war effort.¹⁹ Most of the Purity Flour Cookbooks were not purchased in store, and had to be requested for in the mail. The copy from the 1930s includes a coupon section to exchange with friends, encouraging women to send away for a copy with thirty cents in the mail. Other women were able to exchange tabs of flour for a copy of the book, as proof that they were a deserving and loyal Purity Flour customer. This sales technique furthered the sense of pride the Canadian government was trying to foster, and clearly shows that Purity Flour was selling much more than cookbooks — they were selling patriotism.

¹⁴ Eric Strikwerda, “Canada Needs All Our Food-Power,” *Industrial Nutrition in Canada, 1941–1948, Labour / Le Travail* 83 (2019), 20.

¹⁵ Glenville Jones, “The Discovery and Synthesis of the Nutritional Factor Vitamin D,” *International Journal of Paleopathology* (2018), 96-99.

¹⁶ Payne, “Nature's Bread,” 608.

¹⁷ Payne, “Nature's Bread,” 608.

¹⁸ Payne, “Nature's Bread,” 618.

¹⁹ Ian Mosby, “Radical Housewives: Price Wars & Food Politics in Mid-Twentieth Century Canada by Julie Guard (review),” *Labour / Le Travail* 86 (2020), 202.

Food in the Great Depression

The Great Depression greatly affected Canadians across the country, with one in five relying on government relief for survival.²⁰ The reason I speculate that the cookbook without a cover is from these trying times is largely due to its recipes. The majority of the baking section includes cookies, cakes, and other treats that substitute lard for the more expensive products like butter or milk. An excellent example of this is the recipe for “Johnny Cake,” which calls for “lard or butter” as well as “sour milk.” Many of the recipes that do include butter often have very little or have it as an optional component. This points to times of economic hardship and the adaptability of housewives during those times.²¹ Likewise, this speculation aligns with the family history surrounding the book. The coverless book belonged to a woman named Gertrude “Gertie” St. Peter from Maccan, Nova Scotia. Her only daughter, Bonnie, was born in 1926.²² There’s evidence throughout the book of a small child tracing each illustration with pencil, as if practicing shapes. Likewise, the names “Bonnie,” “Leo,” and “Gertie” are written in scrawling handwriting, the kind of script you would expect from a small child learning cursive (fig. 3). Bonnie would have been learning to write around 1931 or 1932,²³ and if the

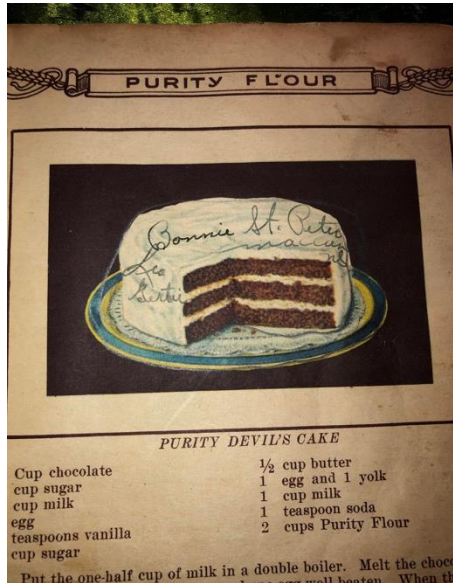


Figure 3

²⁰ James Struthers, *Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983).

²¹ Julie Guard, “A Mighty Power against the Cost of Living: Canadian Housewives Organize in the 1930s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 77 (2010), 27.

²² Trudy St. Peter-Burbine (Alma Hurley’s daughter) in conversation with author, November 2021.

²³ St. Peter-Burbine.

book was relatively new, as the recipes suggest, this would place its publication around 1930.

The fact that this book was possibly printed, and if not printed, then heavily used throughout The Great Depression, situates it in a very precarious moment in Canadian history. It is clear from the tattered edges, stained pages, and lack of cover that the book was used by Gertie, possibly Bonnie later in her life, and passed on to granddaughters. There's a sense of use from this object that cannot help but remind you of its origins. The handwritten recipes alongside the printed ones suggest a reforming of ingredients to make them more accessible depending on one's economic situation. These handwritten recipes intermingling with printed ones hint at that reality, pointing to housewives' adaptability that was becoming more and more relevant in everyday life.

World War II Rationing and Food Propaganda

The 1945 edition that we will be focusing on is *Purity Flour Cookbook: 875 Tested Recipes*, which is the revised second edition printed in 1945. This edition, released towards the end of the war, offers an even greater focus on flour, as it was no longer being rationed in most parts of the country.²⁴ It is a rewrite of the 1932 and 1937 editions, edited and reorganized by Mrs. Kathleen M. Watson. She did this work after graduating from the University of Manitoba with a degree in Home Economics.²⁵ The introduction to the book notes that “despite food shortages, [Watson] has personally tested and carefully selected all recipes,”²⁶ contextualizing the direct aftermath of the Second World War. This introduction offers a glimpse into the daily lives of average Canadian women immediately following the war. Not only does it communicate the food that they were eating and feeding their families, but it can also tell us about the social and emotional ties to that food.

During the Second World War, food and supply rationing was implemented in several countries to allow for shortages and the redistribution of materials; the Canadian government introduced ration coupons in 1942. Gasoline was the first item to be rationed, shortly followed by sugar, coffee, tea, butter, and meat.²⁷ Rationing was a great source of tension among many

²⁴Robert S. Goodhart and L. B. Pett, “The War-Time Nutrition Programs for Workers in the United States and Canada,” *The Milbank Memorial Fund* (1945), 161.

²⁵ Kathleen M. Watson, *Purity Flour Cookbook: 875 Tested Recipes* (Toronto, Purity Flour Mills, 1945), 3.

²⁶ Watson, *Purity Flour Cookbook*, 3.

²⁷ “Second World War Discovery Box,” Canadian War Museum, (accessed November 28, 2021).

families and added to the sense of anxiety and responsibility among housewives that were left to manage households.²⁸ For many, it felt like the country was on their shoulders. In order to purchase the items their families needed to survive, people would hand over rationing coupons to be allowed the essential items listed above.²⁹ We can see the effects of rationing by comparing recipes like “Angel Food” and “Mock Angel Cake.” Where the recipe for Angel Food includes an entire cup of egg whites, the mock version only requires two, or about a third of a cup.

Towards the end of the war, rationing ended for coffee, tea, and meat, but remained for other essential items. From 1945 to 1947, rationing of certain meats was reintroduced.³⁰ This is an example of the long-lasting effects of the war and suggests that those effects forever changed certain family traditions and recipes. There are several handwritten recipes throughout the book that highlight this phenomenon, some of which are from long after the war ended, but still include rationing of certain items. One such example is a recipe for “molasses sugar cookies” which only calls for one egg despite needing four cups of flour (fig. 4).

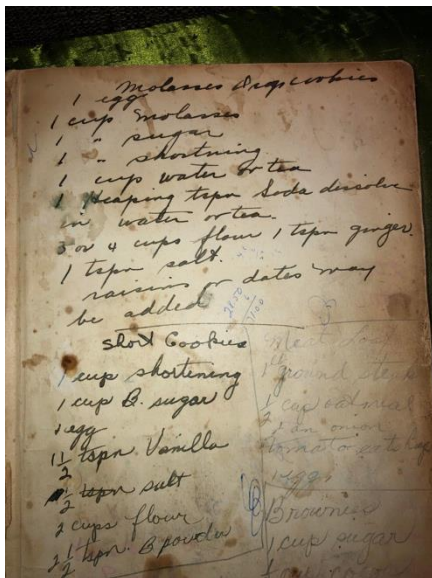


Figure 4

²⁸ Irina D. Mihalache, “Tuna Noodle Casserole is Tasty? The Information Network of Recipes,” *Library Trends* 66, no. 4 (2018), 474.

²⁹ Ian Mosby, *Food Will Win The War* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2014), 7-8.

³⁰ Donna Gabaccia, “Food Will Win The War,” *Canadian Historical Review* (University of Toronto, 2015), 622.

Food propaganda was a huge part of the Canadian government's attempts to unify the nation through nutrition. Canada had made significant promises to Great Britain, saying they would export mass amounts of cheese, evaporated milk, flour, and grains, among other household staples.³¹ Before rationing programs were implemented, the government began pushing for Canadians to purchase surplus items and branded them as patriotic. This was done in the hope that Canadians would then eat less of the items that Britain needed. Among the first foods to be targeted as "proudly Canadian" were apples, which were marketed with sayings such as "[serve] apples daily and you'll serve your country too."³² Advertisements became more aggressive as the war went on, and every household became all too familiar with the idea of food as "a weapon of war."³³ Although the majority of Canadians responded enthusiastically to these calls to action, it was no doubt a time of immense stress.

The push to purchase the "right" kinds of foods and ingredients to feed your family was largely effective because of peer pressure. The idea was that everyone was taking part in this responsible consumerism as a collective, and so people did not want to let their communities down. Likewise, the government pushed for housewives to be inventive and stingy in the kitchen. The Department of National War Services advertised for women to save certain scraps which could be recycled into war materials.³⁴ Throughout the war, the Winnipeg Patriotic Salvage Corps division alone collected 900 000 pounds of fat and bones from housewives and cooks across the city and outer communities.³⁵ All of these working parts and influences greatly shaped how women ran their kitchens during the war. We can see these themes of adaptability and perseverance between the lines of the Purity Flour Cookbooks we have been considering.

Putting It All Together

The 1945 cookbook belonged to a woman named Mary Hurley, and it serves as an interesting case study for the culmination of the information discussed above. Mary (née Allen) Hurley was born in 1908 to Ida and Bert Allen.³⁶ She grew up in St. Andrews, New Brunswick and

³¹ E.C Hope, "Canada's Contribution to the War Food Supply," *Journal of ASFMRA* 8, no. 1, (1944), 10-11.

³² "Second World War Discovery Box."

³³ "Second World War Discovery Box."

³⁴ James Whalen, "The Scrap that Made a Difference" (1998).

³⁵ Whalen, "The Scrap that Made a Difference."

³⁶ Certificate of Marriage, Gardener Sylvanius Hurley to Amanda Mary Allen, 18 December 1929, Cumberland County, Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Digital Copy.

mainly spoke Acadian French until she was in her teens, when she properly learned English.³⁷ She married a man named Gardner Hurley in 1930, and they had five children together: Alma “Tis” born in 1931, Gardner “Bud” Jr. born in 1932, Anna born in 1934; Inez was born in 1936, and, Gary in 1943.³⁸ While Gardner Sr. worked as a labourer in Maccan, doing odd jobs and tending to farm animals, Mary stayed at home. Shortly following the war, while raising her children, Mary built a small shack across the road from her house on land that belonged to the Canadian National Railway. She sold convenience-style items and contraband that would fall off cargo trains as they flew by her house.³⁹ The money she earned doing this and her incredibly savvy shopping and crafty projects were just enough to supplement Gardner Sr.’s income to make sure the family never went without.

Purity Flour was a huge part of the family’s everyday life. Mary bought as much as the family was allotted during times of rationing, and plenty more once they were allowed to buy in bulk again. She used the flour to make cakes, sweets, and of course, bread.⁴⁰ Mary used every last bit of every bag of flour, and even turned the leftover flour bags into dresses for her three daughters. Anecdotally, her family remembers her baking bread every day.⁴¹ Based on the tattered edges of the “How to Bake Bread” pages, this is very likely correct.

After Mary died from an aneurysm in 1967, Alma inherited the book. Alma was married to James “Jim” St. Peter in 1949. Alma and Jim had three children: Bruce in 1950, Laurie in 1952, and Trudy in 1971.⁴² Where her mother had the book for about twenty-five years, Alma had it for over forty. She covered nearly every inch of it in handwritten recipes, added pages from other magazines, and notes from friends. Alma was known for being uncannily like her mother—stubborn, resourceful, and an expert bread-maker. She was also a proud supporter of Purity Flour and frequently baked with the product.⁴³ She was, however, not a housewife; Alma worked several jobs throughout her life. For a time, she was a labourer, a chocolate-maker, and finally, a florist. She loved creating and perfecting all that she created, as is evident from her precise handwriting and the number of times she visited her favourite

³⁷ Trudy St. Peter-Burbine in conversation with author, November 2021.

³⁸ St. Peter-Burbine.

³⁹ Laurie St. Peter (Alma Hurley’s son), in conversation with author, November 2021.

⁴⁰ St. Peter-Burbine.

⁴¹ St. Peter-Burbine.

⁴² Trudy St. Peter-Burbine in conversation with author, November 2021.

⁴³ St. Peter-Burbine.

recipes. The cookies and cakes sections are coated in leftover cake batters and molasses from decades ago, stained in the shape of mixing bowls and measuring cups (fig. 5).

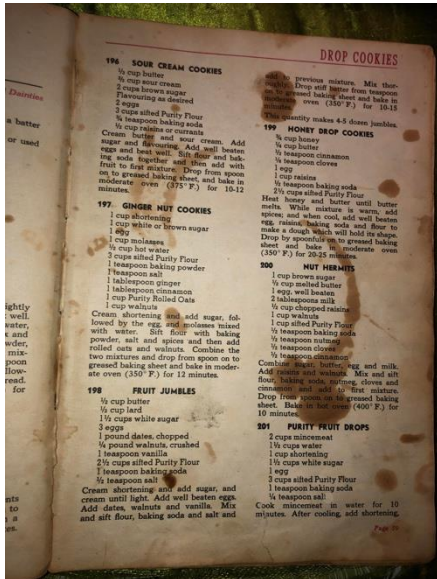


Figure 5

In many ways, Alma appears to have used the book as a sort of diary. In it, she kept unfinished grocery lists, recipes torn out of magazines and newspapers, and notes from friends. One of the most notable examples is an instructional list detailing how to make “pomander balls,” referring to oranges, limes, lemons, or apples that have been inserted with cloves, coated in cinnamon, and then baked (fig. 6). This particular guide is written in another

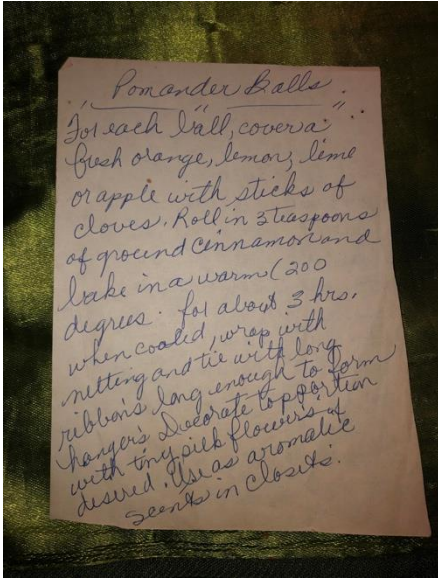


Figure 6

woman's handwriting and scribed on the back of a ripped United Church pamphlet. It is very possible that one of Alma's friends was trying to explain how to make them while the pair whispered in the back of the church, only to rip her booklet so she could write it down for her. It's a moment that points to the importance of women's friendship and shows that the act of sharing and creating was integral to the social lives of rural women in the 1970s and 80s. It points to an idea of shared pride and ownership in domesticity.

After Alma passed away due to cancer in 2001, her only daughter, Trudy, made sure she was the one who got the cookbook. She promptly stashed it away from her older brothers and took it to her home in the nearby community of River Hebert, NS. Here, she wrote many of her favourite recipes onto cards so she would be able to access them without risking damaging the book.⁴⁴ This allowed her to process the death of her mother while her newborn napped in an afghan Alma had made. The book's recipes live on for Trudy and are still actively used. However, the book itself normally rests in her closet in a Ziploc bag of other family cookbooks and recipes. She takes it out from time to time to double-check things, as evidenced by a package of active dry yeast that expired in 2009 that I found tucked in between the quick bread recipe sections. Trudy says she kept it there as a way to remember the conversion for one packet of yeast equalling two and a quarter teaspoons. In this way, she interacts with the book in similar ways that her mother did, using it to store memory aids to improve her baking.

⁴⁴ Trudy St. Peter-Burbine in conversation with author, November 2021.

Conclusion

Even though Trudy rarely takes the physical copy of the book out, its history and contents influence her everyday life. It serves as a reminder of her mother's cooking and is allowed to live on even in its tattered state, in the form of her recipe cards and memory. Although this raises interesting questions concerning the book's materiality and life as an object, I would argue its life is ongoing. So long as someone is engaging with its history in some way, the book lives on as a family heirloom. It contains a record of a very specific and fraught time in Canadian history and highlights the resilience and adaptability of the women who happily devoured each and every page. In some way, that history that it represents is captured in the recipes connected to it, whether they are recited from memory, written on a new card, or in their original form. Furthermore, the history in question represents much more than a nation at war. It serves as a case study for Canadian women's resilience, showcased through a maternal line. From mother to daughter, these women showcase the adaptability and drive the Canadian government pushed for with their food propaganda campaigns. They took food scarcity, poverty, and uncertainty, and turned it into a vibrant and distinct cultural practice.

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