Food Services at St. Ben's: The Early History

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A Nibble at the (Tasty !) Early History of Food Service at St. Ben’s

Photo from SBMA: Main Gertrude Hall 003
THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR FOOD SERVICE

This account of the development of the Food Service at St. Benedict's is at times based on solid documentation, but often it relies on fallible memories, hearsay, or conjecture, and there are then gaps, unanswered questions, and possible fallacies.

Our Chronology of Events includes brief mention of events which undoubtedly affected the department. Waterworks were installed in 1892 and electricity in 1905. Extensions to the Main Building in the late nineteenth century and later to the south of the kitchen itself made additional space available. In 1921 a dishwasher and a steamer were purchased. In 1961 the dairy herd was sold and in 1978 the hog farm was closed. The poultry farm was discontinued in 1976. In 1975 a new dishwasher was used for the first time in the renovated monastic refectory. The Benedicta Riepp Room was added when chapel renovations were done in the early 1980s, and it was blessed on the 122nd anniversary of Mother Benedicta's death, March 16, 1984. The bakery was relocated to the north wing in 1996. It appears the move included the oven, bread slicer, bun and bread rollers, a steam jacket kettle, an electric stove, shelves, and cooling racks. That rotating oven is still used but is supplemented by a newer one that accommodates carts with multiple shelves. That too rotates. They have a small freezer that is reserved chiefly for ice cream and yogurt and a walk-in freezer and a cooler. Since January of 1996 Food Service has been under joint college/monastery management with allocation and exchange of funds between the two corporations and all workers being employed by the college and eligible for the benefits accorded to college employees. Someone who experienced this merger remembers that it entailed a certain amount of confusion and apprehension as all employees had to reapply for work and there was some question about allowance for years of service. Ultimately full credit was allowed.

Father Henry Borgerdig, O.S.B., long-time chaplain, composed a chronicle about the community that also provides some information. Describing conventual life before 1880,
St. Benedict's Convent/Academy (Cecilia, Benedict, and Scholastica Halls) in 1892
http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/SBM/id/26, SBM.03a
“In 1892 the Convent was enlarged with the addition of St. Scholastica to the northeast corner of St. Benedict, resulting in an elongated ‘T’ configuration. St. Scholastica was designed to mimic the original St. Cecilia in scale and detailing; it is nine bays long and has the same type of window openings, although the dormers are smaller and have gable roofs with only one double hung window. Centered in the façade is a balconied, one-story, flat roof porch. The gable end has a series of double hung sash on each level, while the rear elevation is essentially the same as the façade except for the porch.” -- From National Register Report, “St. Benedict's Convent and College Historic District” (1989).
Significant dates in the development of St. Ben’s Food Service:
1892  Waterworks installed
1905  Electricity installed

West facades, early 1900s

1892  Scholastica
1883  Benedict
1881-1882  Cecilia
1898  Gertrude

Photo from SBMArchives
1921  Dishwasher and steamer installed
1930s  Mechanical refrigeration installed
(replacing an ice-block cooler)

Photo from SBMArchives
Mr. Pfannenstein (of St. Joseph Meat Market acclaim) and S. Jameem Mape, St. Ben’s food Service and Instructor in Home Economics.

Photo from SBMArchives
St. Wendelin Hall, the meat packing plant, was built in 1954.

Photo from SBMArchives
St Wendelin Hall Meat Packing Plant
dedication and blessing

Photo from SBMArchives
Food for Fifty title page 001 37-1-1 f1 and p.164
Food for Fifty title page 001 37-1-1 f1 and p.239
PART III
MENU PLANNING

The initial step toward a successful meal is a carefully planned menu. The usual dietary principles and menu-planning suggestions should be followed with special emphasis upon the following points:

1. The age, sex, and occupation of the group to be served. In most cases, the type of food suitable for a men’s civic club would not be enjoyed by a group of high school girls, nor would the luncheon considered by the high school girls as “perfectly delicious” be fully appreciated by the men’s club. Food preferences are definitely influenced as are food needs, by the age, sex, and occupation of the persons comprising the group being served.
1940s  Wood stoves and ovens replaced by electric ones

FoodService_110001 S. Generose Bickler
“Canning was a huge project in the summers; e.g. 700 gallons of green beans.”

1940s
Stainless steel counters and tables replaced linoleum ones

1942
Tile floors replaced wooden kitchen floors (which were scrubbed on hands and knees)

Photos: FoodService_120001 (left) and FoodService_10001 from SBMA
120001: from left: Sisters Mary Andrew Wolf, Philomene Lutgen, Ann Marie Schouweiler, Remberta Westkaemper
Quote from “Food Service Management—Historical Background,”
St. Ben’s Monastery Record Group 37 Introduction, p. 2
“I entered our community in 1944. My first assignment was to the Foodservice. My job was to work on the potato porch.”

Sister Jane Weber

Quotes from *Nutrition panel Sister Jane Weber.doc* in the SBMA, p. 1 & 2. Photo from the SBMA.
I entered our community in 1944....My first assignment was to the Foodservice. My job was to work on the potato porch.

The potato porch was equipped with a commercial electric potato peeler machine. The potatoes were put into a large tank along with water and they spun until the peelings were off. There was an emery stone at the bottom of the tank.

The campus looked very much like a farm. We had a large potato field. The Sisters helped with the harvest. The potatoes were then stored, until needed in the root cellar – that mound in front of Mary Hall.

Back to the potatoes. When they came out of the electric potato peeler, some of the older Sisters came to take the eyes out and to cut them up. They prayed the rosary and litanies during this time.

Sister Jane Weber

Quotes from *Nutrition panel Sister Jane Weber.doc* in the SBMA, p. 1 & 2. Photo from the SBMA.
“In earlier years the Sisters wore black serge for work. Later they had black poplin habits...and still later they had white garb.”

Photos from SBMA, clockwise from upper left: FoodService_90001; FoodService_130001; FoodService_160001 [from left: Sisters Jeanice Janski, Boniface Salm, Innocent Pruesser, Philomena Lutgen; Christmas sweet bread for Doctors in Ogden 1940s]; FoodService_20001.
“Whatever kind of habit it was, it was always topped by a long apron which could be sent to the laundry, whereas the habit would be washed less often.”

Photos from SBMA, clockwise from upper left: FoodService_90001; FoodService_130001 S. Myrna Fischer with milk separator; FoodService_160001; FoodService_20001.
“Sister Mary Elizabeth ...and a host of others were turkey girls when they first came to the community. They named the turkeys, Roosevelt, Delano, Truman, Eisenhower...” Each year the Novices helped pluck feathers on these turkeys.

Sister Jane Weber
“The hired girls lived on campus under the supervision of a prefect. They wore cotton dresses and starched headbands with ‘K’ on the front.”

Photo from 1955 *Facula*
“The hired girls worked long hours and followed a schedule comparable to that of the aspirants. They were apparently happy here despite the work and the discipline.”

“Many of them eventually joined the community and became kitchen sisters and cooks and bakers themselves.”

Photo from 1960 *Facula*
One of them recalls that they had times of fun and that when they heard the prefect approaching, they would cease whatever they might be engaged in and begin praying the rosary - somewhere in the middle.

Photo from 1960 *Facula*
• We raised tomatoes, green beans, rhubarb, gooseberries, grapes...

• We filled gallon jars with beans, processed them in the steam kettles. They needed 3 hours to process, so we did this canning overnight. We’d get them in the processing kettle and go to our break room, setting an alarm to wake us in 3 hours.

• We also canned rhubarb sauce and different kinds of jams.

• We put up a lot of sauerkraut in huge crock jars, kept in the root cellar. We took it out as we needed it...

“The two acres of orchard with apples and plums on south campus ceased to be profitable for it was so close to the Main Building it was subject to constant raiding by students.”

Sister Jane Weber

St. Benedict's Kitchen Crew 1939-1951 On a picnic
FoodService_70001 Refectory 1950s
Photo from SBMA: FoodService_170001 S. Bertram Ethan with bowls.jpg
1961  Dairy herd sold
1976  Poultry farm discontinued

Turkeys

Chicken Coop
“It was only in 1996, when 80% of the consumers were college students, that the Community handed over the management of the food service and leased the kitchen, bakery, cafeteria and dining areas to the College.”

S. Eugenia Hartung, one of the last sisters to work full time in Food Service for the College