

Women Deserve a Holiday  
*\*Putnam County, Tennessee 1850-1970*  
by Mary Jean DeLozier

Certainly the women as well as the men deserved a holiday. Their workday began before dawn and continued about the fireplace after night had fallen. Sometimes taking babies on pallets to tend as they worked, many drudged in the fields. Ollie Mayberry reared thirteen children, loaded hay, hauled hickory to a Cookeville mill, and picked blackberries which she sold in Bloomington Springs for 10 cents a gallon. Wives helped shear sheep, feed cattle, and milk. Caring for poultry was women's work almost exclusively.

Preparing family meals was an extremely tedious job. Women spent long hours cutting meat, plucking chickens, and gathering, washing, and paring vegetables and fruit. In the early years most farm wives cooked in fireplaces, hanging pots to boil on iron racks above the flaming logs or pulling hot coals out on hearths to bake potatoes and heat skillet of cornbread or Dutch ovens filled with biscuits. Wood stoves were an improvement over the fireplace for cooking, but they required careful attention. The fire had to be kept just hot enough to heat the eyes of the stovetop and to circulate air in the ovens without burning the food. Pots were moved from places to place to insure even cooking. Women also churned clabbered milk till the golden hunks of butter "gathered," Then drained off the liquid and shaped the sweet fresh butter into molds.

Most Putnam County families ate simply but heartily. They had corn-roasted, boiled, or fried, or as hominy, grits, mush, or cornbread. Corn liquor, which they distilled themselves, was a common beverage, often consumed at the dinner table by children and adults alike. Pork was important to their diet-as ham, shoulder, bacon, sausage, fatback, or chitterlings. They also feasted on chickens, and occasionally on beef and mutton. From peddlers or local merchants some could afford to buy a few luxuries, primarily sugar and coffee. About 1850 coffee cost approximately 12 cents and sugar 10 cents a pound in the Putnam area. Black pepper and ginger were the seasonings most used. A few housewives also bought cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice.

For many, however, there were few extras. Grime remembered: "I was a good sized boy before I ever saw a stalk of sorghum. I was a bigger boy before I ever saw a sugar bowl on the table. I was nearly grown before I ever saw an orange or lemon, or raisin.

Simple though the fare might be, guests were always welcome and few got up from the table hungry.

Making clothes and linens for the family was another time consuming task for women. While piece goods and some ready-made clothing were available at

general stores, many families could not afford to buy even a button and of necessity manufactured entire garments at home.

First, family members seeded cotton, washed wool, and removed flax from stalks. Then mothers and older girls carded the fibers into soft rolls and rigged up spinning wheels. The machines hummed for hours as workers drew out the thread and wound it on broaches. They next employed an automatic crank to measure the yarn and wind it into hanks.

Dying the thread was the next step. Myra Anne Smith recalled that in Cannon County her family boiled sugar maple bark to make purple, copperas (a pulverized shale rock), for brown, hickory bark for green, ripe sumac berries for black, and cedar tops for gray dyes. Only indigo, for blue, had to be purchased.

After they dyed the thread and sized it with starch, womenfolk wound it on corncobs or spools and then onto the warping bars of the loom. Weaving, requiring patience and skill, was no job for young girls. A skillful weaver sometimes used six treadles to produce beautiful patterns in several colors.

Garments were then handsewn. There were woolen jeans for boys and men and linsey-woolsey (a coarse fabric blend of linen and wool) garments for summer.

The wives of the more prosperous farmers, who could purchase fabrics, were spared spinning and weaving. Calico, 15 to 20 cents, and brown domestic, approximately 10 cents a yard, were leading sellers in Putnam about 1850. Seamstresses could also purchase more expensive goods – red flannel, black merino, and cambric, as well as buttons ( 1 cent each), ribbon, lace, pins, needles, and hooks. Old ledgers show that before the Civil War Putnam Countians bought shoes for \$1.00 to \$1.50, suspenders for 25 cents, palm, sealskin, and wool hats for 50 cents each, “fine” men’s hats for about \$3.00, and “fancy bonnets” for 50 cents to 75 cents. The stores also carried stockings, gloves, handkerchiefs, cravats, and shawls. Men’s pants could be bought by 1860, but there is no record that ready-made dresses were available in Putnam before the Civil War.

It was also the women’s job to knit socks, mend, darn, and repair clothing and linens, and wash. Many farm wives carried clothing to the spring to soak, heated water in iron kettles, scrubbed the garments with homemade lye soap, and then hung them on boards and beat out the remaining dirt. Women made candles by melting tallow or beeswax and pouring it in to molds. They plucked geese and ducks to make featherbeds and pieced cloth squares for quilts. Because of the labor involved, bedding was considered valuable and was often mentioned in wills. In 1886 T. J. Cooper left his wife her bedding and bed clothes (but only for as long as she remained in Putnam County!)

The women who thus worked so hard were usually either pregnant or nursing infants, as well as keeping an eye on a stairstep cluster of children. It is little wonder that many men outlived two or three wives. Yet many women exhibited energy, enterprise, and determination. Mary F. Morgan of Cookeville, for example, found time despite her home duties to invent and patent a tin churn in 1887.

Most homes in the Upper Cumberland in this period were log houses. Couples usually started housekeeping in a one-room cabin, often windowless, and barely large enough for a bed, table, stools, a chest, and perhaps a cupboard.

When children began to arrive, many families built larger log houses, leaving the original cabin as an outhouse. The typical home had two rooms downstairs, each with a fireplace, and a long hall or breezeway between, called a "dogtrot." The family climbed narrow staircases to upstairs bedrooms. To avoid heat, odors, and danger from fires, the kitchen was usually away from the main house.

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The labor and employment of a pioneer family were distributed, in accordance with surrounding circumstances. To the men, was assigned the duty of procuring subsistence and materials for clothing, erecting the cabin and the station, opening and cultivating the farm, hunting the wild beasts, and repelling and pursuing the Indians. The women spun the flax, the cotton and wool, wove the cloth, made them up, milked, churned, and prepared the food, and did their full share of the duties of house-keeping. Another thus describes them:- There we behold the woman in her true glory; not a doll to carry silks and jewels; not a puppet to be dandled by fops, an idol of profane adoration, revered to-day, discarded to-morrow; admired, but not respected; desired, but not esteemed; ruling by passion, not affection; imparting her weakness, not her constancy, to the sex she should exalt; the source and mirror of vanity. We see her as a wife, partaking of the cares, and guiding the labours of her husband, and by her domestic diligence spreading cheerfulness all around; for his sake, sharing the decent refinements of the world, without being fond of them; placing all her joy, all her happiness, in the merited approbation of the man she loves. As a mother, we find her the affectionate, the ardent instructress of the children she has reared from infancy, and trained them up to thought and virtue, to meditation and benevolence; addressing them as rational beings, and preparing them to become men and women in their turn. *Pg. 717*