“We Can Serve Them!”
Beanhole Baked Beans at the Broad Cove Church, Cushing, Maine

Baked-bean church suppers can be found all over Maine, especially in the summer, when the “summer people” can be counted on to swell the ranks of diners, but “beanhole” bean suppers are special. Two years ago my husband, Jim, and I went to the annual Broad Cove event. We recall liking the beans well enough, but it was the array of pies that really caught our fancy—that year there were twenty-nine varieties from which to choose.¹ For eight dollars per person we were served beans, hot dogs, coleslaw, biscuits, a drink, and dessert, which we thought was a very good deal. We had looked in a cursory fashion at the bean-
and these longer stints have given us the chance to get closer to the local people, something we value highly. In spite of its small population (1,204) Friendship’s lobstering fleet is the second largest in Maine. Cushing (pop. 1,300) is the next town over, also with an active lobster fleet; its town center is composed of the town offices/library, the fire station, the elementary school, and Fales’s grocery store, which, proprietor John Fales told me, has been operating in that location since 1829. Artist Andrew Wyeth was for years a summer resident of Cushing. He painted a watercolor of the Broad Cove Church (now on loan to the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland) in memory of his wife Betsy’s parents, who were members of the congregation.

The church’s beanhole suppers as a fund-raising event began in 1974. The procedure of cooking beans in-ground apparently came from the lumber camps of inland Maine and had its origins in Native American cooking. A number of lakeshore campgrounds feature beanhole suppers for their campers. However, according to New England food historian Sandra Oliver, in-ground cooking is an ancient and universal practice, of which Maine’s beanholes are just another manifestation. With respect to the lumber camps’ beanholes, Oliver reminded me that in the times of lumber drives, when logs were floated downriver, the camp cook would precede the loggers by a day, having dug a beanhole and cooked the beans at an appointed location so that the men would find a hot supper waiting for them. In any case, after that first supper I was intrigued by Cushing’s beanholes and wanted to know more about the whole process. Last June I made contact with Sandy Blanchard, the woman in charge of the Broad Cove supper, to learn more about how it is done.

Sandy is not just a person: she is an event. Small and blonde, she exudes boundless energy, earthy good humor, and efficiency. It’s not that she has all kinds of time on her hands, either: besides caring for her year-old grandson three days a week, she is deputy town clerk and custodian at the Cushing town offices, secretary and supply officer of the Ambulance Corps, president of Friends of Christian Rescue, and the staff person in charge of parish relations at the Broad Cove Church. She has headed up the beanhole

Below: Ernie Harrington, Paul Andrews, and Win Reber stir the coals as Carol Reber looks on.

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suppers ever since eighty-three-year-old Jeannette Chapman, who had run the suppers since their inception, relinquished this post. Jeannette, who is now in charge of the pies, is also a model of stamina, as well as the source of historic memory, for she has lived in Cushing all her life and considers herself a lucky woman for having done so.

Two weeks before the supper (July 10 in 2010) Sandy invited me to the only planning committee meeting she held. Besides Sandy and Jeannette, there were Janet Plona, a key member of the core kitchen crew, Kathy Harrington (she sells the tickets at the door), and Carol Moody, in charge of the wait staff. Since every woman knew from past years exactly what to do, this was one of the shortest and best-oiled committee meetings I have ever attended. When I complimented Sandy on her efficient leadership she said, “Well, I’m kind of like President Obama and his cabinet: they all know their jobs, but I like to keep my finger on the pulse.” Every year a set of annotations is drawn up regarding all aspects of the supper: what worked; what could be improved. Jeannette has kept her own notebook of the past thirty-six years of beanhole suppers; of it she says, “If I drop dead it will tell them what to do, and if they don’t do it I may come back to haunt them.”

What kinds of beans are chosen for the supper? I asked. “Soldiers and sailors,” Sandy replied. Sailor beans, also known as pea or navy beans, are small; soldier beans are much larger, white, and have a gorgeous red design on them which really does look like a toy soldier. Whereas the sailor beans are commercially available, the soldier beans are bought specially at the big agricultural fair in Fryeburg, Maine, in ten-pound sacks.

At the meeting Sandy lent me both a CD of photographs of a previous supper and a videotape made in September 1999 for a spot on Charles Kuralt’s CBS Sunday Morning News. The ten-minute segment, titled “A Postcard from Maine,” was narrated by famous humorist Tim Sample, who made a couple of excellent observations: “It takes a lot of people to do a beanhole supper,” and “The ladies in the kitchen and the men tending the fires each have their own secrets.”

To experience this event fully I volunteered to come two days prior to the Saturday supper to help pick over the beans before washing and soaking them overnight. Janet, her sister-in-law Terri Judson (originally from the Texas Panhandle), Jeannette, Sandy, and I took on this task. Sandy handed out aluminum pie plates and we covered the bottoms with one layer of beans, so as to be able to see them easily. The sailors, commercially packaged, were little work, but the soldiers had some stones and defective beans that were carefully separated out and saved for Jeannette’s nine chickens. She said the stones wouldn’t hurt them—that’s what gizzards were for. I opted to pick over the soldiers, as did Sandy; she did two ten-pound sacks in the time it took me to work through one. Beans were washed, drained, and put into the large, enameled metal canning pots in which they would be cooked; they were then covered with water and left overnight. Sandy said that, depending on the humidity in the air and other mysterious factors, the beans did not soak the same way every year. Before filling the pots with beans Sandy fills them partway with water and puts them on paper towels to make sure they don’t leak, an essential first step. We then went home to give our loins for Friday, the really heavy workday.

On Friday there were four two-hour shifts for the men who prepared the beanholes, led by Harold Rogers, master electrician, who had done this many times before. In 1974 the church had only two beanholes; it now has six. The holes are about thirty inches square; the pots are nineteen inches high. Old granite cobblestones line the beanholes to absorb and hold the heat from the loads and loads of seasoned hardwood that are burned all day long in order to create a pitiful of glowing coals. Philip Young Sr., a member of the board of the church and the proprietor of a business selling firewood, had donated a cord of the best seasoned oak. He also plows and sand’s the church’s driveways in the winter. Like Jeannette, Philip has deep roots in Cushing. His great-great-great-grandfather James Young, captain of a two-masted schooner, had been one of the founders of the Broad Cove Church. In speaking with the men who labored over the beanholes, I was glad to see that some summer people were lending a hand. It takes expertise to pile the wood just so, to get the fires started initially and then keep them going. When not tending the fires the men sat in lawn chairs in the shade and chatted companionably. This year the wood burned easily because the weather had been relatively dry; last year, when July had been one never-ending downpour, Philip said it had been just god-awful. “Our job’s real important,” one of the men told me. “We have to watch them embers to see they don’t misbehave.”

What if it rained on the day the pits were fired? I asked. Jeannette assured me that had never happened, though they had had some close calls. In 1996 Hurricane Bertha came, and the eye of the storm was very close, but the rain held off until the beans were in and the pits securely covered—then it came down in torrents.

In the kitchen things were hopping. Sandy’s grandson Gavin had developed a temperature that morning and been sent home from preschool, but this was one day she could not step in. She told her daughter she would have to take
off from work and tend her son herself. Things moved rapidly and in good order. Tables had already been set in the adjoining Heritage Room where the supper would be held. The soaked beans now had to be drained and covered with fresh water to be parboiled.

“Do you put baking soda in with the beans?” one of the women asked.

“No,” said Sandy. “Why?”

“It’s supposed to cut down on the—you know—pfft...”

“Well, that would take all the fun out of it!” she said with a laugh.

“Two burly men, please,” Sandy sang out—the pots were too heavy for the women to lift to the burners inside and propane pots outside where the beans would be cooked for about an hour, or until tender. Two men appeared to do the heavy lifting. “Let’s get the ketchup and mustard containers for the tables filled up” was her next command.

Every now and then there was a lull in the activity, which Sandy used to give housekeeping tips. “If your toilet gets real scrungy and you have eight hours, just get some regular Coke—not flavored or diet—pour it into the toilet and let it sit. What a job it does!”

“What if you let it sit for eight days?” one of the crew joked.

“Well, then it’ll probably eat right through the bowl,” Sandy shot back.

After about an hour of parboiling, the beans were deemed tender enough to be drained and prepared for baking. “We have a secret formula,” Sandy told me solemnly, “and if I told it to you I’d have to kill you!” She then immediately shared “The Top Secret Formula” as we mixed it up, one bowl for each pot of beans:

3 cups molasses
3 cups light brown sugar
3 tablespoons dry mustard
3 tablespoons salt
2 tablespoons coarsely ground pepper
1 pound salt pork (cut in one-inch cubes by storekeeper John Fales, who also donated it)
10 pounds beans
About 1 cup water, saved from draining the beans—just enough to make the formula easy to pour.

Each pot of beans is divided into three layers. Each layer gets about six cubes of salt pork (Sandy rinses them if they are very salty) and one-third of the bowl of formula drizzled, not poured, onto the beans. Janet Plona, known as “the expert drizzler,” took on this job. Then, after covering the beans with enough water to come within two inches of the top of the pot, they were ready for the pits.

The pit men sprang into action, using long-handled shovels to remove the glowing coals onto metal plates lying alongside the beanholes. Harold wired down the pot lids to the handles with straightened coat hangers, then he and helper Joe Smith carried the heavy pots to the pits with a pair of long, straight rods with a hook-shaped flange at the end to support the pot handles. Expertly the pots were leveled; then the coals were immediately shoveled back around and over the pots. The metal plates, a little larger than the beanholes, went over the holes, and sand was shoveled on top to seal the holes completely. It was, in the Maine vernacular, “wicked hot work.” The bean pots were staggered in order by type of bean and ultimately taken out by twos, so that Sandy would always be able to count on both sailor and soldier beans when it came time to serve them.

At five o’clock came the “blessing of the beans.” Pastor Betty Bilodeau arrived and solemnly etched a cross into the leveled sand over each beanhole. She is a great music lover and sang a capella a variation of “Bless This House”:

Bless these beans, O Lord we pray,
Make them cook by night and day...

At this point tarps were spread over all six beanholes, and we all went home. The beans bake in the ground for exactly twenty-four hours. There is no way to check on them to see if everything is going all right—you just have to hope and pray that it does.

Saturday, July 10, 4:00 P.M.: Tables were now adorned with small vases of wildflowers from the surrounding fields. Some fifty donated pies (including the raspberry pie Sandy had still had the energy to bake the night before) were upstairs in the room where the church sells used clothing at bargain prices. The three women in charge of cutting the pies and placing the slices on paper plates used metal pie cutters to divide the pies into equal slices—apparently in years before there had been some grumblings about unequal servings. The pie slices were then carried downstairs by young and lithe “pie runners” to be arranged by Jeannette on a tiered table. This way the diners could choose their pie as soon as they were admitted to the dining room. The selection was once again mind-boggling, and once again, as Jeannette said proudly of her pie runners, “There were no spills.”

The first group of diners was already seated in the church pews, awaiting the signal to be admitted to the dining room. Kathy Harrington and her husband, Ernie, who were taking in the money, had numbered the tickets for rolling admission. To entertain the waiting public there was musical
entertainment, which ranged from Pastor Betty on her accordion to a spontaneous and very good quartet of singers who belted out such oldies as “Throw Out the Lifeline” and “In the Sweet Bye and Bye” to rousing applause.

At 4:45 the first two pots were shoveled out of the still-warm coals. The lid was carefully brushed clean of ash and soot, and then Harold and Joe once again used their long rods to transport the hot, heavy pots to the kitchen. Now came the moment of real drama: the lids were lifted, and heady steam curled out of the pots. Sandy and Jeannette broke a warm biscuit in two and each dug her half into the bean liquid, tasted, smiled, and repeated the time-honored command: “We can serve them!” Loud cheers all around.

In the meantime the men immediately shoveled the hot coals back into the beanholes, and as a safety precaution sealed them with the metal plates and sand. They wanted no curious kids to have a major accident.

In the kitchen things really hummed now. The core crew of five (which included Sandy’s indomitable eighty-nine-year-old mother, Alma Black, and Philip Young’s wife, Suzanne) scooped soldiers and sailors into separate bowls, biscuits into baskets, steamed hot dogs onto plates, and coleslaw into serving bowls. The wait staff brought everything to the eight tables for six, then served water, iced tea, coffee, or orange drink. As soon as diners were finished, their places were reset, and the meal was served again. It was hot in the kitchen. Commander-in-Chief Sandy wiped her damp brow and grinned. “My husband, Wendell, always tells me ‘Your temper ain’t nothin’ but ugly until this thing is over.’”

To observe the whole scene Jim and I had asked to be served late. We sat down at a table with a local family; grandfather Will Payson had, in years past, also been on the beanhole fire crew. I was, of course, perishing to try the beans, now that I had labored in the trenches along with the kitchen crew. And they were superb: sweet, slightly smoky, the beans firm to the bite. Truly extraordinary. Which one did I like better? I had to have seconds to decide that one. In spite of my love affair with the handsome soldiers, it was ultimately the sailors I preferred.

This year the church sold 176 dinners but actually served more, as people who donated items or helped out were given free meals. Servings of beans and extra pies were also sold. Cleanup was done before dark. One year Sandy and her crew were just too exhausted to clean the pots, so they left them out on picnic tables overnight. When they returned in the morning, the pots were clean. Who was the saint who had done this job no one liked? No one confessed, and Sandy figured later that it had most likely been the raccoons.

Broad Cove Church involves almost every member of its small congregation in this herculean event and makes very little profit from it—maybe a few hundred dollars at most—but it defines the identity of this church as no other event does. As Sandy said to me, “This is not a money maker—it’s a social maker. And when I use the word I it is really a gigantic we.”

NOTES

1. I still have the list of the pies made for that supper: French Apple, Apple Crumb, Apple, Blueberry, Cheese, Chocolate Butter, Lemon Meringue, Mincemeat, Peach, Rhubarb, Crusty Coconut, Squash, Pineapple, Pineapple Sponge, Peach Apple, Peach Crumb, Peanut Butter, Custard, Pecan, Pumpkin, Strawberry, Strawberry/Rhubarb, Tri-berry, Rhubarb with Coconut, Mincemeat with Pecans, and Toll House, as well as three pies with Splenda: Rhubarb, Pecan, and Blueberry.


3. Conversation with Sandra Oliver, 16 July 2010.