

# THE PUDDING FACTORY

## In the beginning

It was Mildred Robertson, our beloved A.C.W. president for many years, who brought the pudding recipe with her from London Ontario when she and her family settled in Kitchener in 1945. It was a recipe using all natural ingredients and handed down through many generations.

Mildred would later become Dominion President of the Women's Auxiliary and then President of the national A.C.W. She received the "Order of Huron" in 1980, one of the first three and the first woman to be so honoured. She mentored many women both within St. John's and the wider church. We still hear, and often, "What would Mildred do?"

Mildred suggested that the Evening Branch of the W.A. (there were several ACW groups at that time) make some of these puddings and sell them to raise funds. We believe that in the first year they made 200 pounds and sold them for 50 cents a pound. The price today has increased to \$8.00, which reflects the higher cost of all the ingredients.

Myrtle Luelo joined Mildred as a convenor in the first year, 1949, and continued for several years after. Sales in that first year were much greater than expected and each year the output increased until, in the 1980s they were producing more than 3,000 pounds. The proof of their success is, as they say, in the pudding.

*"Miriam Butler" In the early years the puddings were steamed in the downstairs green kitchen. When the kettles were boiling away people began to notice that the paint was peeling off the walls. The Sexton, a recent émigré from England came in and said, "Oh my. What will -ee say?" Ee, as everyone knew, was the Rector Canon Chester Mixer. The kitchen had recently been painted but when Canon Mixer saw the peeling paint he only exclaimed, "I told them they should have used a good paint."*

In the early days someone came up with three sauce and these were printed up and placed in the package with the puddings. After sixty years these recipes are still added to each order and, we are certain, are used frequently.



**Checking the Raisins**



**Measuring Team**



**Mixing**



**Weighing**

On the first Monday of every November since 1949, the Anglican Church Women of St. John the Evangelist Church in Kitchener Ontario have begun the huge project of preparing Christmas puddings. For the last 25 years, orders have multiplied to over 2400 pounds so that it became necessary to have two teams of volunteers, by now including men and women of the church with some very helpful outsiders. Both the upper and lower parish halls are set up and both kitchens are needed to put the operation in motion.

On the first Monday the ingredients are assembled. The raisins are examined and experienced members remove stems and other unwanted pieces. Flour, sugar and spices, plus other unnamed ingredients are measured and placed in containers. For the one pound puddings we use tins that once contained vegetables and are round with smooth sides. Aging honey tins (producers now use plastic ones) are used for the two and three pounders. All of these cans require a good greasing so the puddings will easily slide out after they are steamed. This process isn't as easy as it might seem.



**Pounding**

*Bette Moore: "Each year there seemed to be a crisis of some kind. Once the fruit peel came laced with shredded plastic and we had to discard the order and quickly find another supplier. On more than one occasion our supply order was incomplete and we had to scramble to get the ingredients we needed."*

*Marie Peacock: "Boxes and boxes of raisins and currents had to be washed, put on trays and blotted dry. When that was done we had to wash the floors that were so yucky that you stuck to them. Your shoes had to be removed before you left and when you got home you had to scrape 1/2 inch of sticky stuff off the soles. (I hate raisins)."*



**Steaming**

On Tuesday morning, shortly after 8 a.m. a large team of volunteers begins to stream in. They all don hairnets, aprons and plastic gloves so they are ready for the production line. Tuesday is our busiest day and both teams (upstairs and down) need to work like a well-rehearsed choir so that the process goes smoothly.

*Dorcas Plant: "Mildred Robertson always tasted the pudding mix before it went into the cans. In 1985 she was later getting around to do the tasting, and when she did?? Horrors!! There was no brown sugar. We checked the trays of ingredients and sure enough the sugar was missing. We had to dump the batter, rewash and grease the cans and set up the trays of ingredients which included the brown sugar."*

At the first table the workers measure and combine 7 ingredients in large aluminum bowls. These are passed onto table 2 where our strongest workers blend them together with a large wooden spoon until the batter is uniform. At table 3 the batter is scooped into waiting tins, beginning with one pounds, and soon to the twos. We need a balance of these to fit carefully into the aluminum steam kettles that have been heating on the stoves. The kettles are each fitted with a wooden rack putting the twos on the bottom and ones above. Those who fill the cans soon learn how much batter looks right in each tin but it is up to the weigher at table 3 to make sure that the quantity is accurate. At table 4 there are 2 weighers who look often at the sign on the wall that indicates the number of KGs that one pound plus the tin weighs. A dollop of dough is added or subtracted until the scale tells her that it is just right.

Next: The tins are passed on to the pounder. He or she is waiting with a wooden mallet and readily pounds each filled tin to be sure that there are no air pockets in the batter. *Jim MacPherson: "I was initiated, or perhaps bossed around when I first became a pounder, by 7 year old Sonja who insisted on showing me just how the job should be done."*

Farther down the production line a group of volunteers is seated at a table ready with pre-cut brown paper circles and industrial strength elastic bands. Each tin is covered with a paper circle and the band is put in place so that it will hold during the steaming process. The ready product is placed on a mobile wagon and taken into the kitchen.

*Judy Winter: "We were only at St. John's for two years when I was asked to be a steamer. I learned pretty quickly as I had a great teacher, Myrtle Luelo. At that time a long time parishioner asked Myrtle just how long this novice had been at St. John's – suggesting that I had not been there long enough! (Now Judy and her husband Dave are on our team of most experienced steamers)"*

The steamers are the most experienced of all the volunteers. Their expertise is needed to judge just how much steaming is required to produce a firm, perfectly done product. It takes 3 to 4 hours for each batch. Stoves are put into action all over the church, The kettles sit on 2 elements, except for the gas stove which holds several kettles at a time. We usually bring some 'rented' semi-disabled stoves into action in the back halls as well. The steamers check the action in each of these with utility gloves and a good flashlight. It isn't as though mistakes haven't been made from time to time. We have lost a few batches and more than one stove in this operation. It is necessary to coax the steamers back the next year, pleading that we can't get along without them.



**Turning Out**



**Result**



**A Perfect Three-Pounder**

*Bette Moore: “Until the rental and purchase of electric stoves for both the upper and lower operations hot plates were used for the steaming process. These were placed in the halls wherever outlets were available. One year we were notified that the fire department was on its way for the yearly inspection. We were only just able to keep one step ahead of them in removing the hot plates which might lead to the shutting down of the entire project.”*

*Trudy Schnarr: “The one memory that will never leave me is November 1985. Alice Steele had passed away and the funeral was held on the Tuesday afternoon of pudding week. The aroma of the steaming puddings filled the church. A gentleman from Good’s Funeral Home asked me what was going on? I took him to see our pudding factory in the upper parish hall. Each Christmas Good’s (now Erb and Good) give a gift to local ministers. On the following year they ordered several of our puddings to give as Christmas gifts, and they have done so many times since then. I told the ACW ‘Alice has passed on but she is still selling puddings’”*



**Ready for Pickup**

By now the church is wafting with nostalgic spicy aromas. Cinnamon and nutmeg prevail and the aroma remains with us until the week is over. The steaming process continues until the entire order is done which keeps the steamers going until 9 or 10 p.m. Often another ‘steaming’ is required on the Wednesday morning.

There is a lunch break at noon on Tuesday when all involved are glad to sit down and relax. Volunteers have been preparing coffee and tea for everyone, and we often have home made treats to help us restore our energy. Fellowship is an important ingredient in the pudding factory and these breaks give us a chance to get to know some people we hardly know, or to catch up with those we do.

Production continues until about 3 p.m. About this time the first batch of steamed puddings is wheeled out to the parish hall and, very gently, turned out onto the tables that have been prepared with clean white rolled paper. This is indeed a satisfying sight. It is now time to clean up the used cans. The messy mixing and weighing tables are washed, and the floors! A preliminary mop-up is performed.

By four o’clock a new team begins to assemble. These are usually high-school students teachers and office workers who will dedicate the rest of their day to the jobs that remain: More steaming, out-turning and ah, the unenviable job of washing and drying the tin cans. The finished puddings are covered with protective papers overnight and the cleanup continues.

*Dorcas Plant: "For many years I was in charge of the upstairs operation-greasing cans, counting, turning the puddings out etc. and always had the same work crews with the addition of some of our soup kitchen regulars who would show up to help. It was very heart warming to know that they wanted to return some of the help that they had received. It took a little more supervision but it was worth it."*

The Wednesday team arrives early the next morning. Some of these volunteers have already spent most of Tuesday in the production line and appear to be quite fresh for another day. Their job is to wrap each pudding expertly in waxed paper. This is a skill that has been passed down for generations. The wrappers sit at tables and chat like quilters at a bee. Some of these will be wrapped again, in clear coloured paper so that they are ready to be given as a gift to the teacher, or the boss, or a neighbour. Each has a destination that is certain to please.

Before the pudding week even starts one of our computer experts has accepted the task of printing up the names of those who have placed orders, and the often complex list of the actual order. For example, we might have "Mary Smith : 7 ones, 5 twos, 1 three." This information is printed on stickers and placed on paper shopping bags so that when the puddings are ready to be picked up the bag is correctly filled and placed, in alphabetical order, on a table in the upper parish hall. Orders are to be picked up on Thursday and Friday afternoons or Saturday 10 to 4 on the days after the puddings are made, and Sunday after church. The Saturday pickup has become another event, resembling a Christmas fete. Our ACW is hoping to sell items from the gift case, and some home made baking as well as the puddings. For a few years we even had a lunch operation with home made soup and, of course, a slice of pudding with sauce, but our volunteers were pretty worn out by this time and we decided not to continue that part of the operation.

*Bette Moore: "About 12 years ago we received a call from the Rector of Holy Trinity Church in Bridgewater Nova Scotia asking if the ACW of St. John's would be willing to share the recipe and methodology of our puddings with their congregation. They were looking for a successful project to raise funds for the restoration of their parish hall. We agreed that the distance between the two parishes would not impact on our project here, and we decided to share our recipe with them. The parishioners at Holy Trinity were able to raise enough funds to complete their renovations and, in later years fund other projects including outreach programs in the community."*

Orders for our puddings must be placed in October so that we know approximately how many puddings of each size that we need to make. We do sell some extras after the orders are complete but we don't want to have too many left over.

Over the years we have increased our orders to an optimum, since we have limited resources in personnel and in equipment. We now have orders for hundreds of pounds for a few restaurants and golf clubs in Waterloo County. Members of our congregation tell us that they have sent a Christmas pudding to Australia, Scotland and California. This year for the first time our puddings will be listed on our church website so we might hear from buyers out there in cyber space.

*Lorraine Atkinson: "I spent Christmas week 2007 on retreat at the convent of the Sisters of St. John the Divine in Toronto. After Christmas dinner I was delighted to find our St. John's puddings on the dessert table, and was able to share the whole process (but not the secret recipe!), from greasing the cans to tipping out the puddings after steaming. One of the guests at my table has even asked me for a reminder call so she may place an order this year."*

At the ACW meeting in December the members take pleasure in assigning the profit of the puddings, along with a substantial sum from the Clothes Closet and the Gift Case, to organizations in our community and in other countries.

A portion of this money is given to our church for ongoing projects. The remainder has, in previous years, been given to women's shelters, St. Monica House for unwed mothers, the St. John's soup kitchen, the Huron Church Camp and to St. George's Church Day Camp. We continue to support a student who is in Dr. Graham's Homes in India, and we support an orphanage in Uganda. The well-coordinated labour of our pudding factory will, once again, bring good will in many areas.



Our thanks to the many hundreds of volunteers who have made this project possible over 60 years, and especially to the convenors who have taken on the enormous responsibility.

Merry Christmas!  
Dede Boulden