

# Masthead

Volume 21, Issue 4

November, 2012



We'll admit it. This is not a Christmas table but it is such a beautiful Suffolk table that we couldn't resist. This c 1930 photo of Lt. Gov. and Mrs. J.E. West was taken in their home at the corner of West Washington Street and St. James Avenue (demolished). Photo courtesy Henry Frazier

## *Come to the Table*

The following article was sent to us by SNHS member Betty Odom. Originally appearing in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* Sunday, December 12, 1948, it was written by the late Elizabeth Copeland Norfleet, the wife of Suffolk native (and historian) Fillmore Norfleet, who taught for many years at Woodberry Forest.

### **Suffolk has Other Treats Besides Peanuts, Especially at Christmas**

If you think that the best thing to eat in Suffolk is peanuts, you've got a lot to learn. Of course, you may be initiated anytime, but if you really want to learn everything at once, the best time to do so is at Christmas. And then you have to be lucky enough to be a guest in a true Suffolk home where the hostess herself is a *cordon bleu*.

Having been nurtured on mouth-watering descriptions of the trays that went back and forth across the street on Christmas morning in by-gone Richmond days, I was not unprepared for the discovery that at least one other Virginia city has developed and maintains to this moment a tradition of culinary artistry that should have made it famous long before this. But it took me years of appreciative tasting and more years of dishearteningly unsuccessful attempts at imitation (even after I fancied myself an apt pupil of Irma Rombauer) before I realized how elusive are these extravagant Suffollian recipes.

Just how unique they are in the whole world of cookery, I am not prepared to say. At least one, the Topsy Cake, is a gilding-of-the-lily of English Trifle. And just where these dishes originated is also a mystery to me, but I know that the recipes have passed along from mother to daughter in the manner of folklore and were probably

evolved from ordinary dishes by a generation of clever women who had a sixth sense about how to make things taste good. For holiday meals memorable is the naïve belief in superior materials, and an affectionate disregard of “balanced diets.” When you dine in Suffolk, especially at Christmastime, you must love good food, forget that you have a waistline, and care nothing for your hostess’ household budget. And she will love you for it.

Most of these precious recipes have been collected in a remarkable volume entitled *The Suffolk Cook Book, Compiled and Edited for the Girls’ Missionary Society of the Christian Church*, and commonly referred to as “The Girls’ Cook Book.” But given this prized collection, you still have to marry into the family of one of The Girls, eat these exquisite dishes year after year, and finally stand beside one of The Girls while she prepares this food before you can be said to qualify as a performer in the rites yourself. The catch is that as every one of The Girls is an artist in her own right, there is usually something she forgot to write down, some deft turn she forgot to tell you or some trick she thought you knew all along. More than often, the recipe in The Girls’ Book is under another title and signed by another person than the artist herself. Therefore, in order to use the book efficiently, you must go through the book with one of The Girls who will thusly edit the recipes for you: “Now, this is the recipe I use for Checkerboard Cake, but it is called White Cake and has Katie’s name on it.” Very complicated.

Moreover, if you pretend to follow in these erudite footsteps, you must ignore economy. The Girls will simply have none of your cooking if you think that eight “rather large” eggs are the same as ten, or that a cup of margarine is just as good as a cup of butter. When they say cream, they mean the triple x variety and none of the top milk. It pays dividends in gustatory pleasure, but the grocery bills are terrific.

If I let you in on some of these wonderful treats and show you how dull your Christmas is going to be if you aren’t in Suffolk, I do not feel that I am being a traitor but pardonably seeking to pay tribute to the delectable productions of some of the best homemakers I know, for I learned by the hardest. Ten years of standing by The Girls at the stove, of realizing how my husband has suffered at my unpracticed hands until I finally caught on, and of experiencing absolute rapture with every whiff and taste of these luscious concoctions have brought me to the point of proudly wishing to share my knowledge with other erstwhile novices. For, as I tell you, the “know how” is only to be got at first hand.

A typical Christmas dinner menu will not impress you as anything special, nor will you see anything unusual in an extra list of the items that are to be found in almost every old Suffolk household during the Christmas octave, but when you read the rules, you must admit that there is much more to it than meets the eye. On Christmas day, dozens of Suffolk families will sit down to this:

Pickled Oysters  
Roast Turkey  
Pickled Beets Mashed Potatoes Sweet potato Pudding  
Any Green Vegetable  
Grapefruit Salad  
Topsy Cake  
Pickled Jerusalem Artichokes, Cranberry Sauce  
Corn Pone Hot Rolls

In the house, there will always be a 15-pound Smithfield ham, a white fruit cake, a Checkerboard Cake, and a great bowl of chicken salad with a boiled dressing. Most of these latter items will be saved for family snacks, for impromptu gatherings during the season, or for before-German\* parties.

\*Suffolk German Club Dances

One of the Suffolk recipes from Mrs. Norfleet’s article:

**Topsy Cake**

(The pièce de résistance of the Season)

Make a good sponge cake to wit: Five eggs beaten separately, one cup sugar, one cup flour, one teaspoon vinegar and one teaspoon vanilla. Beat sugar with whites after they have been beaten stiff, beat yolks until lemon-colored. Add to whites, fold in flour last and add a pinch of salt. Do all mixing with egg beater except stirring flour. Bake in slow oven.

Take this cake when cold and halve it with a sharp knife. Stick into the top of each half quartered blanched almonds until each surface resembles a jagged terrain. Then make about a quart of rich boiled custard. When cold, lace this custard with about 6 ounces of sherry wine. Pour some custard over lower half of cake; place top half on that and pour on more custard, reserving nearly half the custard for pouring over servings at table. Ice the whole cake with the richest whipped cream obtainable, and garnish the whole with maraschino cherries. Chill for at least twelve hours before serving.

# Thanks to our 2012 corporate members:

Bank Street Circle (\$2,500+)

**Birdsong Peanuts**

Nansemond Circle (\$1,000+)



**FARMERS BANK**

*Community Banking Perfected*

Suffolk Circle (\$500+)

**TOWNE BANK**  
*The Best Bankers. Hometown Banking.*

LW's Lawn Service, LLC	
LeOtis Williams Manager	615 E. Pinner Street P.O. Box 3285 Suffolk, VA 23439
Complete Landscaping Services	Phone (757) 925.0747 Fax (757) 925.4943
Licensed & Bonded	"We don't mind working in the heat and our prices just can't be beat"

Seaboard Circle (\$250+)



Printer—insert Phillips-Dawson House picture and info here

Printer—insert Train Station picture and info here

**Printer— new employee:  
Kirsty Reyes,**  
So NEW email:

[kirsty@trainstation.org](mailto:kirsty@trainstation.org)

## PHS Board

Lee King, President  
Sue Woodward, Secretary  
Lynn Barlow, Treasurer  
Darrell Cook

## SNHS Board

Nita Bagnell, President  
Fred Taylor, Vice President  
Kate Cross, Secretary  
Betsy Totten, Treasurer  
Tommy Arthur, Asst. Treas.  
Sue Woodward, Historian  
Sandra Council  
Lynn Cross  
Lee King  
Gin Staylor

## Gifts and Memorials through November 7, 2012

To the Phillips-Dawson House:  
*Dick & Sylvia Pond*

## More Holiday Events

### At the Suffolk Center:

**Handel's Messiah** Chowan College Chorus & Orchestra,  
Tuesday, December 4, 7:30 pm. \$15. 757-923-0003  
Group discount available.

### At Riddick's Folly:

**We Were Marching on Christmas Day, Christmas 1862 -  
Suffolk, Virginia** Friday, December 7, 7:30 pm. \$5.  
Reservations required. 757-934-0822



Rebecca and Griffin Duggan look at the platter that's been used for tipsy cake at their family home for generations. Maybe you'll see the platter when the house is open on our Candlelight Tour. Their family recipe can be found in the (out of print) Riddick's Folly cookbook *A Southern Lady's Spirit* and includes freshly grated coconut and wine jelly. *Photo courtesy Hunter Duggan*

## News from the Train Station

Welcome to our new employee, **Kirsty Reyes**, and best wishes to our former employee, Susie Shirley, who has taken a full time job elsewhere.

**Shop at the Train Station for Christmas!!**



Woman's Club float, 1959 Christmas parade in the 100 block of N. Main St. Marquee of the Chadwick is in the background at right.

Return address/logo

NONPROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
SUFFOLK, VA  
PERMIT NO. 24

Return Service Request-



From back cover of *The Ham Book*, by Monette and Robert Harrell