

*Potlucks:  
Bring a Dish!*

# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

Food is best eaten in company, where it can be shared, discussed, and relished. In preparing and giving food to others, we share a bit of ourselves—our heritage, our tastes, our creativity, as well as our love. As a group or one-on-one, discuss communal food-sharing events like potlucks, *smorgasbords*, picnics, and Thanksgiving. Share memories of communal food events. Develop a menu for favorite potluck or picnic dishes to be prepared. Many elder care facilities already host communal food-sharing events like family or Fourth of July picnics for their residents, their families, and the local community. This activity is designed to position the elder residents, who are the knowledgeable keepers of tradition, as active participants in planning these events. Staff, kitchen staff, or volunteers can direct the lesson plan. Optional art activities also can be included.

## TIME:

Six hours over six sessions (three hours are optional activities).

## MATERIALS:

- Paper
- Pens
- Pencils
- Large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper (25" x 30" is standard)
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

## **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

Activities are designed to increase social interaction between individuals within the care facility, as well as with the elder residents’ family members or outside community, through the sharing of memories and food. Loneliness and boredom will be addressed in this way. The sense of helplessness will be alleviated, as the elders will be active participants in developing and planning a menu for a communal food-sharing event, as well as by providing guidance for the making of the meal.

## **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDIES:**

Dr. Clay Routledge describes nostalgia as something people turn to when they are “psychologically vulnerable.” In “situations that cause negative mood, loneliness, and life meaninglessness” nostalgia improves psychological well-being and a sense of belonging.

As Dr. Routledge explains, “In the laboratory, when people are asked to reflect on experiences, objects, or songs from the past that they are nostalgic about, positive mood increases. This makes sense because when we analyze the content of people’s nostalgic episodes we find that they are mostly positive. It is true that nostalgia can be bittersweet (happiness with a tinge of sadness). However, the net result is positive. . . . [Nostalgia] also increases self-esteem and perceptions of meaning in life. . . . Many nostalgic experiences are connected to personal accomplishments and momentous life events. . . . Nostalgia involves conjuring up the experiences that stick out as worthwhile and fulfilling.

“Nostalgia isn’t just about the self. It is also about our relationships. When people engage in nostalgia, they feel more connected to others. For example, our studies find that most nostalgic episodes are social, and having people engage in nostalgia makes them feel close to and loved by others. The past experiences, objects, movies, and music we love are often anchored in social contexts and thus remind us that we are able to form and maintain relationships and that people do care about us.”

*--Routledge, Clay. “Nostalgia is Good Medicine: Sad or Lonely? Try a Dose of Nostalgia.” More Than Mortal (blog), Psychology Today, August 11, 2009. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/more-than-mortal/200908/nostalgia-is-good-medicine>*

Three studies having a qualitative design were conducted; one in South Africa, a second with ethnic Norwegians in Norway, and a third with the Sami in Norway. “Traditional food strengthens the feelings of belonging, identity and heritage, which help persons with dementia to hold on to and reinforce their cultural identity and quality of life. Taste is more cultural than physiological. Dietary habits are established early in life and may be difficult to change. Being served unfamiliar dishes may lead to disappointment and a feeling of being betrayed and unloved. . . . Traditional foods created a feeling of belonging and joy. Familiar tastes and smells awoke pleasant memories in patients and boosted their sense of well-being, identity and belonging, even producing words in those who usually did not speak. . . . In persons with dementia, dishes remembered from their

childhood may help maintain and strengthen cultural identity, create joy and increase patients' feeling of belonging, being respected and cared for. Traditional food furthermore improves patients' appetite, nutritional intake and quality of life. To serve traditional meals in nursing homes demands extra planning and resources, traditional knowledge, creativity and knowledge of patients' personal tastes. ... Besides helping to avoid undernutrition, being served traditional dishes may be very important to reminiscence, joy, thriving and quality of life." [Abstract]

--Hanssen, I. and B. M. Kuzven. *"Moments of Joy and Delight: The Meaning of Traditional Food in Dementia Care."* *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 25, no. 5-6 (March 2016): 866-74. doi: 10.1111/jocn.13163

# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

1. The person directing this activity plan should explain that the individual or group will be sharing memories of communal food-sharing events like potlucks or *smorgasbords*, fish fries, picnics, and wild game feeds. Explain that they then will develop a menu consisting of appetizers, main dishes, side dishes, desserts, and drinks based upon those memories that are appropriate for a residential, family, and/or community potluck or picnic.

2. The person directing the activity should introduce the discussion by reading aloud from the following text:

Holding communal food-sharing events is very much a strong tradition on the Northern Great Plains. One can find church and civic potluck dinners, pancake and sausage feeds (sometimes held as charitable fundraisers), Fourth of July picnics, fish fries, wild game feeds, and *smorgasbords*, which are comprised of a wide variety of ethnic foods, from *kuchen* to *lefse* to Swedish meatballs. Sometimes these communal food-sharing events are focused around holidays like Christmas or Easter, with specific foods made for those specific occasions. Certain foods are deemed appropriate for certain occasions. What is Easter without Easter eggs, for instance? Regardless of the type of food or the reason for the gathering to make

and share food, the effect is the same: a strengthening of social ties, friendships, traditions, and memories to share in communion.

3. To provide examples of such events and to begin generating discussion and the recollection of memories, the person directing the activity should read from among the following selected examples in the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore item “7. A Program and a Potluck,” page 198, Chapter 8
- folklore item “8. A Fun Time for Everyone,” page 198, Chapter 8
- folklore item “31. Helping One Another,” page 210, Chapter 8
- folklore item “33. A Norwegian Thanksgiving,” page 211, Chapter 8
- folklore item “49. Homemade Chicken Soup,” page 219, Chapter 8
- “Wild Game Feeds: A Celebratory Sharing of the ‘Bounty of the Land,’ ” page 235, Chapter 9

4. The person directing the activity should then use the above folkloric examples to engage the participants in discussion with questions such as the following:

- What events did you attend that included the communal

sharing of food?

- Have any of you experienced a fish fry, a wild game feed, a pancake and sausage feed, a family gathering where everyone brought food to share during a certain celebration? If so, what kinds of foods or dishes were shared?
- What was your favorite food?
- Tell us about the event. What was it like? Where was it held?

5. After discussing their favorite foods, ask the participants about foods they did not like and how they avoided eating them. This is likely to be a particularly fun discussion, especially for grandchildren.

### SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

1. The person directing the activity should explain to the individual or group that this session will focus on potlucks and is a more specific continuation of the previous session. Explain that this discussion will entail the development of a menu for a residential potluck supper. Begin this session by asking:

- Have you attended a picnic or a church or civic potluck? Tell us about it. What was it like? Who was there? When and why was it held? Tell us about the food you remember being shared at potlucks or at picnics.

Note: If the elder care facility is planning a residential and community potluck, then focus the questions on potluck foods. If the elder care facility is planning a residential and community picnic, focus on picnic foods. For purposes of illustration, this activity plan is geared towards potlucks.

- What are some of your favorite dishes at potlucks [picnics]? When you think of potlucks [picnics], what foods do you think of as quintessential potluck [picnic] food? For example, green bean casseroles, Jell-O salads, baked beans, *lefse*, meatballs, coffee, bars? What else? (“Bars” are a unique Great Plains dessert category that varies considerably. So, if “bars” are mentioned, specify what kind. Ask participants to describe different kinds of bars.)

(A volunteer or the person directing the activity plan should hang large sheets of self-stick, easel-pad paper on the wall to make it easier for the participants to see. On the paper, write in big, bold lettering words like the following for column headings: “main dishes, side dishes, desserts, drinks, etc.” Responses then can be listed under the appropriate category. For example, Swedish meatballs can be listed under main dishes, bars listed under desserts, green bean casseroles under side dishes, and so on. The person directing the activity should verbally repeat the name of the dish to be written down, as well.)

- Did you or a family member prepare food for a potluck? If so, what did you or your relative make and share? What ingredients are used to make it?

(A volunteer or staff person should write down the name of the dish under the appropriate category heading with the name of the person who made it.)

2. With the participants, the person directing the activity should review the list of categories. If the list under certain category headings like “drinks” or “main dishes” is too short, draw attention to it and ask the participants for more ideas.

3. With the participants, the person directing the activity should review all the categories, and, through the process of voting, set priorities as to what dishes the residents would like to be prepared for the communal food-sharing event. Specific numbers of dishes for each category may need to be set based on the budget. Keep in mind, however, the essence of a potluck is to have a wide variety of dishes from which to choose.

4. Ask those participants whose dishes are included in the finalized menu to provide a written recipe for the dish or verbal instructions to the kitchen staff or others who will be preparing the food. This likely will require volunteers, kitchen staff, or the person directing the activity to follow up with contributing individuals after this session ends and before the next. The recipe or instructions should be completed and provided to the person directing the activity plan for the next session. At the time of preparing the food, if feasible and appropriate, have the residents, especially those whose dishes are included in the menu, work with the kitchen staff in preparing the food or to oversee the making of the dish and to give verbal instructions.

(Note: Some people with memory issues may need a little extra time and prompts to recall what was done or talked about in

previous sessions. Please adjust new sessions accordingly.)

### SESSION 3 (1 HOUR):

1. The person directing the activity should collect written recipes or verbal instructions for dishes to be included in the potluck from those who are contributing. The list of foods to be included in the menu should be reviewed and read again to the group. The person directing the activity plan should then ask the residents if they have suggestions for dishes not mentioned that have since come to mind.

2. The person directing the activity should introduce the discussion by reading aloud from the following text:

A wide variety of oral folklore exists that involves eating, drinking, and giving thanks. Sometimes this oral folklore contains important health-related messages. Sometimes the folklore is humorous or serious, religious or secular. Many people say grace or other prayers, like, “Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts to us be blessed. Amen.” There are drinking toasts, which generally reference life or health: the Yiddish and Hebrew “*L’Chaim!*” (to life!), the British “Cheers,” the Spanish “*Salud,*” the Danish and Swedish “*Skaal,*” the French “*a votre sante*” (to your health), and the German “*Zum Wohl.*” There are also parodies of blessings or drinking toasts, such as, “Through the lips and over the gums, watch out liver, here it comes!”

3. For further examples of this kind of oral folklore to generate discussion and the recollections of memories, the person directing the activity plan should read the following selected examples from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore items “36. To Your Health,” “37. May We Never Disagree,” and “38. Traditional Toast,” page 269, Chapter 10
- folklore item “87. A North Dakota Bear Story,” page 253, Chapter 9.

The following or similar questions should then be asked:

- Did your family say grace before meals? Can you recall what was said?
- Did you, your friends, or family members ever provide any toasts before drinking? Can you tell any?
- Do you recall any funny or parody blessings or toasts?

Note: Another staff person or volunteer should write down the examples of food-related proverbs, drinking toasts, jokes, and meal prayers or forms of saying grace that the participants share. The participants may have heard the examples provided or they may have heard variations of them. It is fine to record variations of the examples provided. In the discussion notes, attribute the name of the person to the folklore item that is shared.

4. Then briefly explore proverbs, poems, or sayings related to food by reading the examples below from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore items “4. A Moment on the Lips” and “5. Sit Awhile,” page 112, Chapter 5
- folklore items “25. Last Words” and “28. Peas With Honey,” page 267, Chapter 10
- folklore item “30. Mama, Papa, Sister, Brother,” page 268, Chapter 10

Engage the participants in discussion by asking if they recall any similar sayings, bits of wisdom, jokes, poems, or proverbs related to food:

- Do you know any proverbs, poems, or sayings related to food, such as those in *Sundogs and Sunflowers*?

Note: As before, another staff person or volunteer should write down the examples that the participants share. It is fine to record variations of the examples provided. In the discussion notes, attribute the name of the person to the folklore item that is shared.

5. The person directing the activity should explain to the participants that they, the participants, will design and create a flyer to distribute to those people attending the potluck [picnic]. One side of the flyer will list foods the group identified as being favorites at potlucks. The other side of the flyer will include the forms of grace, meal prayers, drinking toasts, proverbs, poems, and jokes related to eating and giving thanks that were collected during the activity. The name of the person who provided the oral folklore should accompany the appropriate text.

### SESSIONS 4, 5, AND 6 - OPTIONAL SUGGESTIONS (1 HOUR EACH, FOR TOTAL OF 3 HOURS):

1. Work with the residents to design the flyer with the list of potluck [picnic] foods and the oral folklore compilation. Also, work with the residents to design an artistic-looking menu that features the foods voted on and included in the potluck [picnic]. Include the name of the person who provided the recipe or information for the dish that is included.
2. Work with the residents to make artistic table decorations related to the theme or potluck [picnic].
3. At the potluck [picnic] meal, ask participants or volunteers to read some examples of saying grace before the meal. Also, ask for volunteers to read some of the toasts from the flyer or to provide their own.

#### **AUTHOR • DR. RACHELLE H. (RIKI) SALTZMAN:**

Dr. Saltzman was previously the Folklife Coordinator for the Iowa Arts Council and is currently the Director of the Oregon Folklife Network at the University of Oregon in Eugene. She provides assistance with multicultural, accessibility, and diversity issues; project development; event planning and implementation; presentation of traditional arts and artists; grant writing; and curriculum content. She has created award-winning online folklife curricula, works with Iowa Public Radio to produce *Iowa Roots*, and was funded by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University to research and develop the website Iowa Place-Based Food. Since 1982, she has worked in the field of public folklore at private nonprofit and state agencies. Saltzman has written numerous articles, served on national boards, and authored *A Lark for the Sake of Their Country: The 1926 General Strike Volunteers in Folklore and Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

#### **AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST:**

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.