

The Ladies Aid

They do not always call it the Ladies Aid, it may be the Lady Helpers, or the Guild of this or Organization of that, but the membership and the purpose are always the same. The ladies of the church are the members and their purpose is to coax the elusive quarter from its habitat in the masculine trousers pocket, and with the sum thus amassed pay an installment of the minister's salary, paint the church, or start a fund for a new piano. The methods used by the society may be various, but whatever novelties may be attempted there is one method, sanctioned by convention and consecrated by much use to which they always return, and that is the church supper.

From a financial standpoint it must be confessed that the church supper, in a country church or in a small village church, is an absurdity. The members supply the raw material, they supply the skillful cookery which makes the raw material into toothsome dishes, they supply the service, and they and their families pay for the privilege of eating the food they have furnished, cooked and served. From time to time some member revolts against a plan which brings comparatively small reward in money for a very great deal of work, and proposes a system of dues or voluntary donations. These plans, however, are seldom given even a trial, the church supper is grounded far deeper than mere expediency, it makes its appeal to all the instincts of sociability and hospitality. When one considers the quantity of food to be prepared and served these suppers are managed by the Ladies Aid with surprisingly little effort. Custom has

made such preparations second nature to these experienced cooks. Certain dishes have become indissolubly associated with certain events, thus the word Thanksgiving conjures up the image of a well-browned turkey, Christmas means roast goose. The Fourth of July demands lemonade and ice cream and in Iowa, church supper is synonymous with chicken pie. Church suppers are usually held in the autumn when the spring chickens have grown beyond "frying size" but are still luscious and tender.

As a first step a committee is appointed and they telephone to each member of the society and to such interested outsiders as may be counted upon for contributions, requesting chicken pies of such and such dimensions and all the other supplies which are essential for the supper. Everyone cheerfully promises to do all that is requested and on the afternoon of the eventful day, carriages and motors packed with curiously shaped bundles approach the church from all directions.

The church is usually a small white painted building with a spire of modest proportions within which is housed a most discordant bell. The yard about the church is well grassed and the building is shaded by box-elders and cotton-woods. At the rear of the lot are long sheds designed as a shelter for teams, but serving equally well as a cover for motor cars in stormy weather. The grave-yard is sometimes near the church, sometimes at a considerable distance, but its well kept walks and well trimmed grass betray

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the influence of the Ladies Aid, reinforced, perhaps, as the Ladies Cemetery Association. but composed of the same members.

Most of the churches have Sunday School rooms which are an addition of recent years and here the tables are spread for the supper. The tables are tops of planed boards laid upon saw horses and easily stored in small corners when not in use, but ^{on this occasion} they are so draped with long white linen clothes that no one could tell anything about that. Upon the ocean of white linen are scattered delectable ices in the shape of dishes of jelly, in shades varying from the deep purple of the grape, through the rich red of plum and currant to the pale translucent gold of the apple; there are pickles, less green and more tempting than the pickle of commerce, dill pickles, salt pickles, and this temptingly piquant sliced pickles in bewildering abundance. By five o'clock all is ready, behind the scenes in the tiny kitchen all is ordered bustle. Already the festive odor of coffee is perceptible, the older ladies are ready to serve, the pretty young girls and the pretty older girls, in their dainty white dresses, protected by wholly inadequate lacey aprons, are ready to ^{wait on the tables} serve. Shortly the men begin to arrive and the first plates appear from the kitchen. Such luscious pieces of meat, no miserable bits of skin and bone, these chickens must be all breast and second joints; such great "Cremes" or fluffy crust, such mounds of mashed potatoes, all inundated by a gravy which is the sublimated

essence of chicken, There is cabbage salad, too, and fruit-gelatin, quivering and quite saturated with fruit and nuts, and presently a cup of coffee of a wonderful amber clearness. One must be careful about the cream, so thick it is that it can scarcely be said to pour like a liquid, rather it drops in a mass into the coffee and floats on top in a delicious creamy island. Before the chicken pie has disappeared the servers come around with more, huge pans still smoking from the fire, and whatever one's resolutions may have been one is sure to succumb to the seductive charms of one's favorite piece, be it breast, wing, liver or the part that goes over the fence last, just peeping out from the shelter of the well browned crust. There is other pie to follow, slices triangles of mince, custard and apple laid together in an agreeable mosaic, and garnished with a goodly piece of cheese. After another cup of coffee one confesses to feeling full, quite full, and leaves the table in a sort of epicurean ecstasy.

The tables are cleared with wonderful swiftness and those who have been serving eat their dinner - more chicken pie miraculously saved from the general devastation in short an abundance of all the eatables and drinkables reappears. Some one counts the money which has been collected in a cup, as the price for the supper is only twenty five cents the amount is not extremely large but the ladies are satisfied. Amid much chatter the dishes are washed, the remaining food collected in the baskets and rollers and wagons disperse. There is a general feeling of

serenity and well-being such as invariably comes from satisfied appetite, everyone agrees that the occasion has been a success, for the ladies there has been, in spite of the work involved, an opportunity for friendly chat, this one's cooking has been praised, and that one's deftness in sewing; their lords have exchanged opinions on politics, and have discussed such vital matters as the price of hogs and corn and the amazing rise in the value of Iowa land. Those social instincts which are strong in every properly constituted human being have been pleasantly gratified, and if anyone remembers that the amount of money received is scarcely the third part of what the materials and the labor really are worth, he realizes that the intangible benefits are all the greater.

The Ladies' Aid, however, has other forms of activity; it manifests itself not alone in the occasional supper, but in regular meetings which bring the ladies together for an afternoon twice a month. These meetings are for the ladies only, and where literary clubs have not yet penetrated and the jargon of the bridge table is an unknown tongue, they serve every purpose from the helpful exchange of ideas and embroidery patterns to the somewhat scandalous gossip which is the resort of those persons of whatever age, sex or condition, whose minds are empty of other interests. These regular meetings may be held at the church but are more often at the home of some member. Sometimes there is work to be done, "comforters," elaborate memorials of misdirected femininity in distress, composed of

tiny bits of brilliant woollens, set together in elaborate patterns, are brought to be lined with bright cottons and tied with brighter yarns; or there may be plain sewing to be done, but usually after the brief business meeting, the hymn and the prayer with which the society opens, there remains only the real business of the meeting - the supper.

One hears of church societies in which elaborate refreshments are not permitted, but these stories are more will o' the wisps, when one approaches the vision vanishes. The attempt has often been made, generally by limiting the number of dishes to be served, but one hostess counts only the more solid viands, failing to reckon such trifles as pickles, jellies and cookies, and the next, who has a reputation to sustain, adds another dish to her menu until limits are forgotten and each successive supper is as elaborate as the first, the strength and the skill of the server will permit. These suppers are certainly no trifles when one considers that the guests frequently number sixty, in that number is included, of course, many children, but the matter is not bettered thereby, since both their appetites and their capacity for scattering eatables and spilling drinkables are quite limitless.

On these occasions one pays ten cents for a supper which, if served in ordinary fashion, would consist of three courses, but the meat course and the salad course appear together on a plate which is balanced with the skill of

long practised on one knee while the coffee cup may be deposited on the floor or located in a carefully cleared section of the plate. When this plate is cleared, other plates of dessert appear and the coffee cups are refilled.

All this clearing of plates, this demolition of piles of sandwiches, this destruction of whole cakes, angel's food, devil's food, burnt sugar or spice cake, does not interfere with conversation. One who is familiar with the company can seat herself so as to have precisely the sort of conversation she prefers; this group is sure to be discussing new embroidery patterns or the latest whims of dress, the group in the corner are deep in the consideration of certain complicated receipts, there is the lady whose ideas are absolutely bounded by her family rival, and that other who is acquainted with the most intimate affairs of everyone in the countryside. Her ability to acquire information is little short of marvellous, and her greatest pleasure is to be the first to repeat some interesting novelty. Her chatter is for the most part amiable and inoffensive, but there are others who remember every shameful and discreditable act which has occurred for the past twenty years, and should one be so unfortunate as to find a place near such a person, one is speedily driven to wonder that most of the neighbors have escaped the penitentiary.

When the supper is eaten most of the party speedily leave, spurred to departure by the remembrance of hungry men folks at home. A few remain, for the hostess must not be left alone to confront the mountains

of soiled things which fill every available space in
 kitchen and dining room. One scrapes the plates and puts
 the pots and kettles to soak, another plunges her hands
 into the warm water with its creamy froth of suds,
 while the dish wipers, equipped with fresh tea towels,
 stand ready to polish glasses and silver as they emerge
 glistening from their bath. The piles of dirty dishes
 diminish rapidly under this well planned onslaught,
 and piles of clean plates, rows of glistening tumblers and
 heaps of polished silver take their places. Within a
 surprisingly brief space of time all traces of the late
 devastating Florida Fever have disappeared, the helpful friends
 depart, the weary hostess sits down with the blissful
 certainty that not for a year will she again be asked to
 entertain the society, and with the cheerful
 recollection, that despite the appetites of the sixty, her
 providence in the matter of food has been such that
 without further effort on her part her family can
 feast delicately for several meals.