

Female cooks were of great importance in forestry

Photo: Museum of Forestry in Lycksele's photo collection



◀ The female cook busy fetching more firewood. Being a cook was a demanding but independent occupation for young women in rural areas. For many it was a first job, for others a welcome source of extra income for the family. One thing was for sure: in forest cabins the cooks planned their own work, unlike those serving as maids in town.

At the beginning of the 1900s, studies by doctors and the Swedish state showed that forest worker diets were monotonous and lacking in nutrition, a health hazard. Their diets were based mainly on coffee, pork and so-called charcoal buns. Female cooks were employed in order to improve forest worker health. In many cases, the cooks were only 14–20 years old, but had learned the necessary domestic skills at home. In the 1930s, courses were introduced in subjects such as nutrition and basic healthcare. It was hard work, but still had great appeal because it was a well-paid profession for women at the time. The cook system became more common between the 1930s and 1950s.

Background

The forest workers lived in forest cabins far from home during the working season, which was mainly the winter months. When the forest workers cooked for themselves in their cabins, it was mostly coffee, pork, crispbread and so-called charcoal buns. Charcoal buns were made from water and flour and fried in pork fat in a cast iron pan. Forest worker diets were studied by the Swedish state in 1933, which found them lacking in nutrition. The concept of a joint household, a so-called cooking team with a cook, was to improve their diets.

Female cooks

Most cooks were female, but in a few cases male cooks were also seen in the cabins. That most of the cooks were female was not something decided from

the outset, but the 1933 state study found that women were better suited to the profession and had domestic experience from home. Moreover, women were generally considered better at home economics, which was necessary to calculate food costs. Equal pay did not exist back then, so female cooks were paid less, which was fine by the forest workers as they wanted cheap meals.

Cooking team

Between them, the forest workers formed a cooking team and employed one or more cooks. The Swedish state recommended one cook for a household of 10–12 workers. One of the forest workers was appointed house manager, sometimes referred to as the 'cook's father'. In addition to their normal duties, the house manager was responsible for the joint household and

coordinated matters with the cook. They helped the cook to fetch grocery orders and to collect their wages from the forest workers, for example. The cooking team jointly owned the utensils and tableware, which were auctioned off at the end of the season or were kept by the house manager for the next cooking team.



Photo: Museum of Forestry in Lycksele's photo collection

▲ Cook course organised by the County Labour Board in 1943 in Kølsta, Västmanland. During the 1942-43 winter, more than 6,000 women were working as cooks throughout the forests of northern Sweden. Course tutor Dagny Hedfors at the head of the table.

Training

Cook courses, which were to guarantee the quality of the cooks' work, were introduced in the 1930s. Independently to begin with, such as at rural domestic science schools, then the Swedish parliament passed a bill initially providing free courses for 500 cooks.

The course syllabus covered nutrition, food science, home economics and basic healthcare. The cook courses turned knowledge previously passed down in families into a profession. A skilled cook reduced food costs compared to forest workers each preparing their own food.

The cooks knew how to calculate food requirements and how to make the most of leftovers. A cook without these skills risked increasing food costs. In the 1940s, cook advisers were also employed, and they travelled to the forest cabins to advise the cooks.

Food

The cooks prepared traditional Swedish fare from scratch. They often bought a half or an entire pig or cow, using the internal organs for pölsa, a dish similar to haggis, and the blood for blood bread or black pudding. The bones were boiled to make broth.

When interviewed, cooks talk of the demanding work butchering carcasses that were frozen solid with an axe or hand saw. Dishes such as pea soup, stews, black pudding, pölsa, and pork with kidney beans were commonly served in the cabins. After dinner, the

workers were served dessert. This could be a crème or soup made from dried fruit. Blueberries and lingonberries were used for crèmes and jams. Bread could be baked from leftover gruel or porridge.

Working day

The cooks could be expected to work from four in the morning through to nine in the evening. Moreover, they also spent their Sundays cleaning the cabin while the forest workers went home to their families.

They began the working day by preparing coffee and sandwiches. Leftovers from dinner, gruel and porridge were served for breakfast. Potatoes and herring were also common breakfast foods. Lunch, the main meal of the day, was served sometime between noon and one. The forest workers had coffee and buns in the afternoon. In the evening, the forest workers ate leftovers. Porridge or gruel was a common evening meal.

The cooks washed the dishes, fetched firewood and water, kept the cabin warm, laid the table, made pickles and prepared meat between meals. In addition to this, the cooks could be expected to make the beds, repair clothes and do laundry, if such duties were part of their contract. Once the dishes were done, the dishwasher emptied, fresh water fetched and preparations for the next day completed, the cook's working day came to an end.



Photo: Museum of Forestry in Lycksele's photo collection

▲ In addition to cooking, the cook's duties included cleaning, keeping the cabin warm, and fetching firewood and water. Sometimes, they also included basic healthcare, laundry and mending clothes. The photo was taken during the 1940s or 1950s, when it was also considered important to make the cabin feel more homely. The cook could achieve this by, for example, hanging curtains.

Accommodation

Forest cabin standards varied greatly, although between the 1940s and the 1960s matters were more organised. Some cabins were ramshackle cottages

while other cabins were modern barracks. In barracks, the cook could have their own room near the kitchen, sometimes referred to as the 'cook's cage'.

The more dilapidated cabins usually had only a single room in which everyone slept. An iron stove was placed over the hearth in the middle of the room. In such cases, a partition was erected between the cook's and the forest workers' sleeping areas. These partitions were made of cardboard or perhaps just a piece of cloth.

Often single women

The cooks were considered respected colleagues. It was common for the cooks to have relatives or acquaintances among the forest workers, which meant that the other forest workers most often behaved properly in the cabins. Nonetheless, cooks were subjected to both advances and sexual innuendo.

There are stories of cooks who employed a tough attitude and responded with a 'foul mouth' if anyone behaved inappropriately. In general, the forest workers seem to have been keen for the relationship to work well as they greatly appreciated the cooks' work. A cook could sometimes find their future husband in the cooking team.

Work

In the 1930s, a cook could earn SEK 35 a month, with food and accommodation provided. In comparison, a maid earned less than SEK 25 a month. Moreover, working as a cook was considered more independ-

ent as the cook organised their work as they saw fit, unlike a maid who was subordinate to other members of domestic staff. The rest of the year, some cooks worked planting saplings, clearing forests, thinning clearings or picking cones.

Done cooking

The forest workers progressed from working with saws and axes to working increasingly more with machines, which meant fewer forest workers were needed. A joint household was no longer as necessary as before.

Also, increasingly more jobs were created for women as the industrial society developed in the 1950s. The profession of cook began to lose its appeal.

By the end of the 1950s, there were better roads and it was possible to make a daily commute, which allowed forest workers to live at home and bring a packed lunch. The profession of forest cook disappeared during the 1960s.



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Project PINUS, a project for innovative experiences in managed forests, aims to gather the tourism industry, the forest industry and forestry academia in efforts to create opportunities for tourism in managed forests. Project PINUS began in August 2016 and runs until November 2019. The Museum of Forestry in Lycksele is the project owner.