BETTY FIERROS
Commentary

And now, the real story of chicken booyah

My grandfather, Alexander Hannon, insists he invented the soup everybody loves, chicken booyah.

I'm sure there are many claims like this – one restaurant maintains that the soup was named after a turtle soup but later chicken was used. Be that as it may, my grandfather was born and raised in Champion, the son of two of the first settlers there, Francois Hannon and Celina Martin, and was one of nine children.

His parents never learned to speak English and, indeed, did not feel education was needed past elementary school. So my grandfather never went beyond second grade because he was needed to help on the farm. His parents spoke a French dialect and were called Walloons, and that was his first language.

He worked as a lumberjack when he was 14 and eventually learned the carpentry trade. He was self-employed all but six months of his entire life, and he lived to be 92.

Everyone should have a grandfather like mine. His main purpose was to have fun, and he was quite a practical joker. He drove my grandmother crazy because he would spend money as fast as he made it. And sometimes they could not pay the taxes on the houses he built for them and they had to sell them. But for us kids, he could always be called upon to play games and teach us tricks. He was so strong he could wrap a handkerchief around his right hand and punch a large nail right through a 2-by-4 plank.

But back to booyah. The way he tells it, he and his friends one day stole a chicken. After plucking and cleaning the chicken, they decided they were going to make chicken and dumplings, a Sunday tradition at that time. However, they had no idea how to make the dumplings, so they decided to boil the chicken and put in all the vegetables they could pick from the gardens around the farms. In went carrots, green beans, peas, onions, potatoes and corn.

It turned out to be pretty good, and Grandpa named it chicken "booyah," a French derivation of bouillon, which means soup. And he swore that was the way it started. Occasionally, he would use rabbit in place of the chicken, and once he even tried putting in a turtle. I never ate those variations.

I do remember eating it when I was very young, because both my mother and my grandfather served it at times. When I was first married, my grandfather had added beef to the booyah and also celery, but the chicken was still tossed in, skin, bones and all, because he said that made the flavor better.

The first time it became a tradition at St. John the Baptist Church's picnic in the late 1950s, it was still served that way, and there were bowls on the table to put the skin and bones. So now you know that version of the history, and as far as I know, my grandfather never lied.

Nowadays the booyah makers put in tomatoes (Grandpa never liked tomatoes) and pinto or kidney beans and sometimes even pasta or rice to make the soup thicker. Recently I heard that some people even put rhubarb in it. Grandpa Hannon must be turning over in his grave.

Betty Fierros has a journalism degree from Arizona State University. She is now an area resident and tutors at Green Bay's Howe Elementary School.